

# Interpreter

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## Interpretation: Another View

*Frank McKelvey is the curator of mechanical arts at the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware. When he spoke at the AASLH seminar in Williamsburg last fall, we asked him to share his views on interpretation with readers of The Interpreter. Barbara Beaman interviewed him.*

**BB:** What do you think is necessary in order to have effective interpretation in a museum?

**FM:** A well organized interpretation department, I think, is very important because it assures interpreters that there is a support organization that enables them to do their job without having to worry about paychecks, time off, parking spaces, schedules, and the like. Also there must be an obvious commitment on the part of management to the idea that interpretation is important. With this commitment, managers of interpretation and training can go to curators or to a research department and ask for certain types of information in usable forms for their people, which might not be the same forms used in a published article, for example. Cooperation among all departments is vital—channels of communication must be open.

The biggest key to effective interpretation, of course, is the skilled interpreter. To be effective, interpreters must realize that they're not trying to teach everything that can be taught in certain exhibit areas but to provoke the visitor to want to learn more. Certainly interpreters need a good supply of factual information and techniques for delivering the message. But they must also understand group dynamics, be willing to experiment with different ways to transmit messages, be able to "read" visitor reaction, and recognize visitor fatigue.

**BB:** How can artifacts be used to best advantage?

**FM:** Teaching history is what we do, but we are teaching it through the use of artifacts—not simply as a stage setting—but actively using our artifacts as a springboard for interpretation. We must be able to move beyond the mere identification of an object into a discussion of a related interpretive theme. Good period rooms should have three or four "grabbers" that prompt visitor questions. There might even be an artifact that the interpreter can handle. There's a danger, though, in slipping back to old patterns of interpretation in which the guide simply points out objects: that's a certain kind of bowl, this was Aunt Harriet's so-and-so. You can use artifacts just for the sake of pointing them out as you move the visitor from room to room, or you can use them as vehicles for teaching history.

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## Blacksmiths at the James Anderson Site

*Peter Ross, master blacksmith, discusses how the move to the James Anderson site will affect interpretation of blacksmithing in Williamsburg.*

Our upcoming move to the James Anderson Blacksmith Shop will offer some potential for interpretation not available at the Deane Forge.

In a general sense, we will be talking more about how tradesmen fitted into the overall community—not only physically, but also economically and socially.

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**Interpretation, continued**

**BB:** For going beyond individual objects and their owners to larger concepts.

**FM:** Yes, and when I say "use," I don't mean you have to touch many of them.

**BB:** Production processes are somewhat like artifacts because they have so much inherent appeal for visitors. How do your interpreters achieve the springboard effect of getting to larger issues?

**FM:** We try to supply our interpreters with a broad background of historical information relating to our site so that they can get to other aspects of the worker's world of 1870-1880. You can do that very precisely with labels in a formal exhibit, but live interpretation is the very best way because the interpreter can adjust to the questions and interests of the group.

Processes and artifacts serve another valuable function—they're icebreakers. It's easier to develop rapport with strangers if you have some object or process to focus on. Remember how hard it was to answer a question in French class when the teacher stared right at you? If the teacher was good, he or she concentrated on something else—maybe a word on the blackboard—so that the pressure of interpersonal relationship was relieved. Processes give you the opportunity to release this tension, and they're understandable.

**BB:** At Hagley your black powder process and your machine shop are fascinating—is it difficult to get people interested in a theme about the worker's world?

**FM:** No, it's not too difficult, but even if visitors do not relate to the larger theme, it's all right as long as they are having a good time with what they are learning. Once we get them to Hagley, they love us—90 percent say they had no idea how much was here, and they want to return. Hagley operates water turbines, a steam engine, a hydroelectric plant, a stone quarry, the machine shop, and black powder processing equipment. These are foreign to most people. We have a difficult time orienting visitors to an industrial site, but once they realize we are talking about people through our artifacts, they understand. The events in Williamsburg occurred a long time ago and have acquired a sort of romance. Hagley is not that far removed from a lot of middle-class people whose parents worked in factories fifty and sixty hours a week, and who

may have been injured or killed in factories. We really have nothing that's delightful to sell in gift shops—our machine shop turns out gears. People don't want to sand and refinish things after they visit us. So we have that to overcome. We are able to take advantage of people's experiences at Williamsburg and Sturbridge, though. You've laid the groundwork for us to interpret the nineteenth century.

What we're trying to do now is to divide the museum into four thematic areas. Interpreters are familiar with all the themes we want to deal with, but only certain ones are brought up in any one area. We hope the visitor will leave with a sense of the whole.

**BB:** What can the individual interpreter do when he or she knows that there is a line outside of the building? (This is not a problem to be shared with visitors, but somehow the interpretation must be effective yet expeditious.)

**FM:** I don't know. I think I would begin to find out by polling the interpreters.

**BB:** We've discussed the desirability of provoking the visitor's curiosity to learn more, to ask questions. That takes time. How can we achieve that sort of interaction during heavy visitation?

**FM:** Yes, it does take time. We can assume that at each station there's a certain amount of information that should be imparted. The danger is that the interpreter will take one look at the crowd and launch into a monologue that only identifies the theme just to get the first group out and the next group in. What would happen if the interpreter explained where the visitor is, pointed out two or three key features in the room that would interest them, gave some information, and then just waited for the visitor to fill the void? One person in a group usually will ask a question, the others will listen to the answer, all have a sense of participation, and the rapid-fire monologue is avoided.

**BB:** What do you think interpretive education for the interpreter should include?

**FM:** I think interpreters should feel that they are professionals—that fund-raising, public relations, even the collections, are a backup to what they do. The artifact may be essential, but the interpreter's transmission of information justifies the artifact's being there in the first place. Why do people become interpreters? They have this desire to pass on

to other generations the ideals or the understandings of our society, our history. They also have a passion to continue learning. If a museum just gives interpreters a script and tells them to do this, then they'll lose them. Interpreters must be allowed to do some of their own research. Then instead of saying that the curators told me to say this, they will be saying "I just read this in an 1834 almanac the other day." This generates enthusiasm. You have to be able to give this interpreter the praise that is due—quite often the visitor won't give praise. Something that I'm beginning to find out is that you have to do something about weak interpreters because the other interpreters know who they are, and, if they are allowed to continue, it's an indication to better interpreters that nobody cares. Improving weak performance helps the individual as well as the visitor, but it also lets everyone know that quality is important.

**BB:** We've read about "interpretive burn-out" in museum journals. What does that mean to you?

**FM:** Interpretive burnout means that the interpreter is losing the sensitivity necessary to deal with visitors on a human, person-to-person basis. To compensate for that, the interpreter begins to give information aimlessly in a rote manner. Visitors are bored and trapped.

**BB:** What do you want for the visitor?

**FM:** All I want to do is to provoke him. I don't want to tell him life was better then, or worse. I don't want to deal with value judgments, but I want him to have an image to which he can add other information, and I want that image to be as historically accurate as possible. The other thing that I want him to learn is that history can be a lot of fun when it's dealt with in an interdisciplinary manner mixing political history with buildings, artifacts, animals, and other topics.

**BB:** How do you judge the effectiveness of an interpretive program?

**FM:** There are two ways we can answer that question. The first is feedback from the visitor. Some visitors come with prior knowledge and ready-made interest in your story. They will challenge you with perceptive and diversified questions. Others are willing to be made interested. Although history has not been their specialty, their questions are evidence that you've succeeded in "turning them on." There are others who don't ask, don't smile—

they just look and move on. That can be discouraging until you realize that people don't smile when they're thinking. Contemplation is not a gleeful experience. So you can't rely on lack of enthusiasm as totally accurate feedback. A visitor who solemnly leaves one exhibit may find something at another site that obviously intrigues him. We can't expect visitors to absorb all that there is to absorb in a large outdoor museum and stay attentive and exuberant about all of it. We have to acknowledge the truth in the observation that a museum is a place where learning occurs while one is standing up. Visitors can be uncomfortable, tired, and somewhat disgruntled about being part of large groups in confined spaces. You may not get a positive response, but these same folks may relate what you've done to something they see in another museum or back home.

The second way to analyze effectiveness is to get interpreters together to air problems that they have identified from their own experience. It works so much better than having someone from the front office come down and say this is how we're going to solve the problem. Interpreters are likely to come up with workable and permanent solutions—solutions that take in the realities of dealing with visitors because they are the ones who do that.

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## Occurrences

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Once again the Christmas season is upon us with all the special opportunities and programs it brings. Grand Illumination will be held on Thursday, December 15 this year. This traditional beginning to the Williamsburg Christmas season will include music, entertainment, and fireworks as well as the first lighting of the Historic Area.

Between the 15th and the 31st there are many opportunities to see and enjoy our Christmas programs. The plays and ballad operas, colonial games, assemblies at the Capitol, tavern nights, and special candlelight openings at the Palace will provide excellent holiday experiences for all. Be sure to keep abreast of events through the *Visitor's Companion* and Christmas brochures.

### Anderson Site, *continued*

The location of the Anderson Forge is of great significance in understanding the common mix of manufacturing, retail businesses, and residences along Duke of Gloucester Street. Anderson's purchase of Lot 19 in 1770 for £600 was a substantial investment for a tradesman and implies something about his choice of location.

In fact, Anderson was not unusual in his choice of property. Research has provided the names of five other smiths, James Geddy I, William Geddy, John Moody, John Draper, and Hugh Orr, who purchased or rented lots on Duke of Gloucester Street for their shops. Another smith, James Bird, rented property on Market Square for his operations. All but Bird, Orr, and James Geddy were working at their shops in 1776 when the war broke out. Currently only the Geddy Foundry stands as witness to this integration of industry and community. Further development of the James Geddy site with gunsmithing and cutlery activities will reinforce this idea.

In a more detailed sense, we will be talking about Anderson's business. During the Revolutionary War, Anderson's responsibilities as public armorer expanded dramatically. We get some idea of these activities by studying the public store records. During the war the public store was set up in much the same way as our twentieth-century Colonial Williamsburg warehouse. Soldiers or civilians working under government contracts could draw out supplies and equipment necessary for their activities. Acting as public armorer for the commonwealth, Anderson had access to these goods. We can trace some of his shop's activities through his requisitions for iron, steel, coal, tin, and so forth as well as for cloth for his workmen's clothing and bedding. We also learn the names of the nine boys making nails in the shop and a little about John Gregory, a filecutter at work there too.

In addition to the records of Anderson's military-industrial expansion, records of his civilian work for the same period also survive. By studying his ledgers we learn much about his customers and his function in the civilian community. This work ranged from making keys, mending a box iron, altering a spring for a chariot, and making an ax to cleaning a gun. This provides us with some good comparisons between agricultural ironwork and preindustrial manufacturing for the army.

Another area of expanded interpretation focuses on the shop itself. The building is intended to represent a class of construction used in the eighteenth century but not often chosen for reconstruction by Colonial Williamsburg. Extensive use of clapboard siding, dirt floors, coarse interior sheathing, and plain fenestration will help give this building a very different character from most structures in the Historic Area. The staff at the Carpenters' Yard is currently preparing materials and will erect the shop using only eighteenth-century processes. All hardware, including nails, is being produced at the Deane Forge. This in itself will make a great difference in the appearance and character of the structure and call attention to the hierarchy of building types in town.

It is our hope that moving the blacksmith operation to the Anderson property will help re-create more of the bustle of the eighteenth-century town. The smoke, noise, and industrial refuse should provide a clearer picture of the prominence of tradesmen on the main street—just as the Geddy family's trash pile did in the eighteenth century when it spread into Duke of Gloucester Street and onto Palace Green.

By creating a different environment and calling on a much greater store of historical documentation, we hope to bring more life to both the trade and the community of Williamsburg.

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*The Interpreter* is a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education.

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