

INTERPRETATION 101

Museum Pieces

Today I'm going to take you through some general principles of interpretation, followed by how I've used them to develop the character of a woman in the 10th Massachusetts Regiment.

There are worksheets and articles on interpretation and character development here; they're also posted to my website and I have cards with the address so if you'd like to have these in a digital form, you can download them.

So, what is interpretation? It's not just a vague fuzzy place that gets us in trouble communicating with our family and friends: it's a principle for developing museum exhibitions and cultural presentations, and that's where it applies to us.

INTERPRETATION

A mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.

©Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman, 2003

This cultural resource planner's definition is a pretty good one: a simpler version is that interpretation is how we bring the past to life by connecting visitors to history.

Breaking this down, for us in the Brigade, the mission is, broadly, to recreate the life and times of the common soldier of the American War for Independence, 1775-1783.

The communication process is how we present ourselves, our impressions and our actions.

We're the resource, along with our stuff— our material culture— and the meanings are the stories we tell, the “Big Idea” we want visitors to understand.



WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

The Big Idea is the answer to the question, So what? We use that to figure out what a museum exhibit is about, and it works for us, too: What do we, as living history practitioners/re-enactors/interpreters want visitors to walk away with? It's sometimes called the "takeaway message," but in essence, ask yourself, What *must* the visitor learn? That's the Big Idea.

That "must" will be different from unit to unit, and person to person within a unit, even day to day within an event. It can be a process of negotiation with a visitor who has no historical context.

In the photo, the exchange demonstrates the different roles of "masters" and "servants" in a federal era house. Mrs Smith was reprimanded for reading *Moll Flanders*, so she's showing her new book, Hannah Glasse's *Servants Companion*, to her master, Mr Mason. One Big Idea here is about a lack of privacy in 18th century houses. (everyone's life was an open book...)

YOU ARE THE EXHIBIT

- What you wear
- What you have
- What you say
- What you *don't* have



In the same way that a museum exhibit is a curated interpretation— an assembly of objects and text to communicate a Big Idea— your impression is curated (assembled). Every thing you wear and carry, how you speak and behave, creates the “exhibit” that is your impression.

But equally important is what you don't have.

You may have to point out to visitors what you don't have, but those lacks can be as important as what you have.

“I miss my family, I miss my farm, I wish I had...” in first person,
“Soldiers missed their homes..” “Soldiers complained about food...”
“Officers complained about lack of discipline...” are ways to get at what you don't have in third person.

WHO ARE YOU?



Specific:
Rev. Enos Hitchcock

Composite:
Mrs. Kitty Smith

Typical:
Tenant Farmer

So what's your exhibit about? Well, who the heck are you? Are you.... A specific character? Enos Hitchcock is one of my favorites, given his connections to both the 10th Massachusetts and Providence. He comes with a cubic foot or more of primary source material: sermons, notes, diaries, and accounts for clothing and food.

You might be a composite like Mrs. Kitty Smith, housekeeper in a federal mansion. She's an assumed name for a position we knew existed but for which we had no name or specific person.

You could be a cat-loving tenant farmer with no voting rights, typical of the post-war lives of many common soldiers of the Revolution. In the 10th Mass, the cat-lover is a private soldier, in keeping with the way the Brigade presents "the life and times of the common soldier."

FIRST TO THIRD

First: Grounded in the past, interprets in present tense (Plimoth)

Third: Grounded in the present, interprets in past tense (OSV)

Whether or not you're a named character, you can still use the idea of a character to shape your interpretation.

First person and third person are the ways we typically present living history characters, and both have merits and pitfalls— first person can be very narrow, with only one perspective (your private soldier in the Hudson Valley may know very little of the larger politics of the war, even if you, the historian do); and visitors have to be willing to play along. No all will; some find it creepy.

Third person can be less engaging— more of a costumed lecture than an living history interpretation. We also risk “period creep,” as our biases filter into the presentation.

But you can use first person methods to make third person more interesting and engaging It's where I go when I'm lost or bored with what I'm doing. I ask

FIRST PERSON THINKING

- Personal Sphere
- Occupational/Domestic Sphere
- Stational Sphere
- Local Sphere
- Worldly Sphere

To figure out “who I am,” I use the spheres outlined by Stacy Roth in “Past into Present;” the Ultimate Character Development List for the Gung-Ho interpreter, is one of your handouts. It’s an exhaustive list of questions that start with your character and work outward.

Every question you answer about yourself, for yourself, anticipates a question a visitor might have and gives you something more, or maybe new, to talk about, especially if you’re trying a new impression— a change in class, or unit, or geographic location. I had to work through this to get from RI to Massachusetts,



THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

A lot of what we talk about are things— stuff, equipment, accouterments, possessions: material culture. Each item we carry has meaning or utility.

What you have and carry will be based on who you are.

One of the simplest ways to check your baggage is by using Object Biographies.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHIES

- What is it?
- Where did you get it?
- When did you get it?
- How does it work?

Gentlemen: Bonus points for not choosing a musket!

Asking a series of questions about what I have helps me determine what I have, and why I have it, why it's important to me.

All the questions I ask myself create answers for the public and help me know what I can have, and what I cannot. I just cannot justify carrying a rosewood sewing box in the field, so I don't, even if I really like my box.

Gentlemen: I know visitors always ask about the weapons, but you can also talk about shoes, hats, a letter from home, a hunk of cheese you're saving for later. It might seem baffling at first, but based primary sources, the soldiers are not thinking about their muskets, but about broken shoes, cheese, and selling shirts for cash.



WHO WAS BRIDGET CONNOR?

So, Bridget. I don't know quite how I got into this, but somewhere last fall, along with thinking about the Rev. Hitchcock for an event at work, Henry mentioned the weddings and baptisms Hitchcock performed, which led us to women in the 10th, and that led to Bridget.

Naughty, naughty Bridget.

Regimental Orders, July 23^d 1782

At a Regimental Court Martial whereof Cap^t Francis is president, Brget Conner a Woman Belonging to the 10th Massachusetts Regiment was tryed for purchasing a publick Shurt from a Soldier in S^d. Regiment found Guilty and Sentanced to Return the Shurt to the person from whom She purshed it and loose what She gave for the Shurt---

The Col^o approves the opinions of the Court and orders it to take place Immed iately

There's not much about Bridget in the records.

She is mentioned twice in Captain Stephen Abbott's 1782 orderly books: first on July 23, when she's court martialed for purchasing a "publick shirt."

Regimental orders July 25th 1782

Briget Conner a woman Belonging to the 10th Massachusetts Regiment is Directed to Leave Camp Between this and to Morrow Morning at Roal Call for the Insolence to the officers of s^d Regiment on pane of Being Treated with Severity

Capt. Stephen Abbot's Orderly Book, pp 140 & 145. Fam. Mss 1 Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA

On July 25, she is cast out of camp for insolence to the officers of the 10th.

And that's all I've been about to find about Bridget.

HUSBAND?

CONNOR, EDWARD. List of men mustered in Suffolk Co. by Nathaniel Barber, Muster Master, dated Boston, March 16, 1777; Capt. Childs's co., Col. Weason's regt.

CONNOR, FRANCIS. Private, Col. Benjamin Tupper's (10th) regt.; enlisted Dec. 25, 1781; service, 7 mos.; reported deserted July 25, 1782.

CONNOR, HENRY, Boston. Descriptive list of men returned by Nathaniel Barber, Muster Master for Suffolk Co., dated Boston, Sept. 25, 1780; age, 21 yrs.; stature, 5 ft. 7 in.; complexion, dark; occupation, weaver; residence, Boston; mustered by Ensign Phelon; joined Col. Henry Jackson's regt.

*Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War,
Volume 3, 1897*

She may also have had a husband. Francis Connor deserted the same day Bridget was expelled from camp.

This is the only mention of Francis Connor I have found in searching pension applications and compiled muster rolls in the National Archives and Massachusetts census records and a brief search of New York records.

So far, Bridget appears nowhere but the Abbott

BRIDGET IN FIRST PERSON

Personal: Married, without other family

Occupational: Laundress, possibly seamstress

Stational: Unpropertied laboring class

Local: Boston or environs

Worldly: In NY, originally from MA

With so little source material, I *have* to extrapolate.

Thanks to Henry's thesis on the origins and types of companies in the 10th Mass, and their origins, and articles and monographs about unpropertied and impoverished residents of 18th century Massachusetts— including Deborah Samson and Jane Franklin Mecom— I've reached probable conclusions about Bridget.

Even with a name, a place and dates and events, Bridget remains in many ways a third person. I can “be” Bridget as a character, but she is grounded in generalities and typologies. Given what little material there is, I think that kind of hybrid is OK: grounded in primary and secondary sources, Bridget's character pushes our interpretation forward with greater details about the

HAS	MAY HAVE	LACKS
Shift	Stockings	
Stays	Shoes/Mules	Mitts
Petticoat	Hat/Bonnet	Anything silk
Kerchief		
Pockets		
Gown		
Temper	Husband	Refinement
Cunning	Numeracy	Family refuge
Cash	Literacy	

To inhabit Bridget— design her character, if your will-- I started from the skin out: what does Bridget wear? How would I describe her character?

I used a simple three-column chart, because I knew so little about her.

My answers are based on what we know about the typical clothing and experiences of lower-sorts coastal New England women in the late 18th century.



INTERPRETING BRIDGET

The nice thing about Bridget's story is that it contains multiple ideas:

- Women followed the army and worked for it especially when
- They had no place to remain at home, if they had no property or family beyond their husband/brother/son
- Everyone in camp was subject to the rules of the Articles of War
- Camps were busy, crowded places where discipline could be hard to maintain
- Not everyone was a hero: some soldiers, women, and sutlers were profiteering

CONTEXTUAL EVENTS

Soldiers Steal a Shirt
~July 13-14, 1782

Court-Martial:
Paul Poindexter and Titus
Tuttle, for theft of a shirt
July 15, 1782



Depending on how ambitious we feel and how many of us there are, we can run about a week's worth of shirt-related action over the course of a day or two.

The first 'event' is extrapolated from the evidence of the Abbot Orderly Book, the second is recorded– but to have a court-martial, you have to have the precipitating event, so soldiers can get caught stealing shirts.

For that, we only need three men and a shirt or two.

For a regimental court-martial, we need more people:

Ideally, two soldiers (Paul and Titus), and accusing officer, and three officers of the court. For props, we'd have the shirt evidence, a table and seats for the court, and perhaps an orderly book to record the judgment.

KEY EVENTS



Discovered buying a shirt*
~July 21-22, 1782

Court-Martial for buying a 'publick shirt'
July 23, 1782

Insolence to Officers of the 10th Mass*
~July 23-24, 1782

Court-Martial for insolence
July 25, 1782

Expelled from camp*
July 25, 1782

The starred events are extrapolated based on the record in the orderly book; these are things that must have happened in order to precipitate what we find in the orderly book.

There's a lot, and it could be overwhelming when we're also running a camp and feeding people and participating in the daily routines of a larger event, but as we try to recreate the experience of a military encampment surrounding a battle, this level of activity would be appropriate and accurate.

I imagine the officers probably felt harassed and annoyed by the men and women who misbehaved, and by managing all of these people and their needs and functions in the face of an ever-present enemy. And I think that running a series of scenarios or vignettes throughout an encampment or event creates interest for visitors and a reason for them to stick around and find out what happens next, and what happens ultimately.

This is where I think the vignettes fit.



We are the people who made coats for one event: that's a level of specific interpretation that not everyone wants to engage in.

Using first-person thinking and primary source accounts to challenge and re-affirm our impressions makes every event more interesting for us, and for the public. And that's what interpretation can do for you.