

“WE’RE TRYING TO MAKE THIS PICTURE COME ALIVE AGAIN”: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW SITE HISTORY IS PRESENTED TO SCHOOL GROUPS AT CHITTENANGO LANDING CANAL BOAT MUSEUM, CHITTENANGO, NEW YORK

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Abstract: Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum is an historic site comprising the remains of a former canal boat building and repair complex, located within Old Erie Canal State Park, east of Syracuse, New York. The purpose of this study was to examine how site history is interpreted in on-site elementary and middle school programs, and specifically to develop an understanding of what was meant by staff comments to school groups about bringing the site “back to life”. Research included participant observation of school programs for grades four through seven, as well as a semi-structured interview was conducted with the educational program coordinator. Field notes and the interview transcript were coded, and microanalysis and comparison techniques were employed to identify emerging themes. Results indicate that site history is primarily depicted as comprising a single past condition, depicted in a photograph from the late 1870s. The site as interpreted to school groups is frozen in time, or “fossilized history” that is based upon a myth of the site’s abandonment, burial, and subsequent rediscovery and rebirth. New exhibits and signs, in conjunction with interpretive opportunities provided by the museum’s new Visitor Education Center, would enable the museum’s school programs to include references to social and economic changes in the surrounding

region, while also providing a sense of chronological narrative at Chittenango Landing. In this manner, the site’s spatial continuity with the surrounding landscape and temporal continuity with its 20th century history could be enhanced.

Introduction

Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum is an historic site within Old Erie Canal State Park, approximately fifteen miles east of Syracuse, New York. The site comprises the remains of a nineteenth century industrial center, including a boat building and repair complex, along the Old Erie Canal. The Erie Canal, which bounds the museum property to the north, was in operation from its completion in 1825 until it was replaced by the New York State Barge Canal in 1917. In 1985, Chittenango Landing was acquired by Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum, Inc., a non-profit organization formed by area residents hoping to excavate the canal boat repair complex, reconstruct as much of it as possible, and interpret it to the public. Since that time, several structures have been reconstructed on the property, including a canal dry docks, a store (which has served as a museum and gift shop), and a sawmill/blacksmith shop. The locations of other former buildings (residences, a barn, and other outbuildings) have been marked with signs. Several building foundations are exposed on the site, as well as the partial remains of a canal barge, preserved underwater in an excavated trough beside the Old Erie Canal. Chittenango Landing also contains a recently-constructed Visitor Education Center, dedicated in July, 2003. The building occupies the footprint of the main building in a former cannery complex; a few walls of one of another cannery building still stand, adjacent to the Visitor Center.

In addition to being open to the general public during three seasons of the year, Chittenango Landing also offers school programs during the fall and spring. In the fall, separate programs are offered primarily to 5th/6th graders and 7th graders, while educational programs are geared almost entirely to 4th graders during the spring. These programs include: a variety of hands-on activities about life along the Old Erie Canal; partial tours of the site (emphasizing the dry docks and sawmill/blacksmith shop); an archaeology simulation, in which the children unearth artifacts

and process them; a slide show telling the story of the excavation and reconstruction of Chittenango Landing; lessons on interpreting primary sources; and a first-person interpretation program about life during the canal era. These programs are run by staff educators (including the education coordinator) assisted by volunteers.

The purpose of this study was to explore how these school programs interpret the site's cultural landscape history to elementary and middle school students. As this investigation progressed, another purpose emerged: to develop an understanding of what was meant by the notion of bringing the site "back to life", as expressed several times to various school groups by staff members at the site. Specifically, what makes a site "living" in the first place? Using concepts derived from Michael Hough's *Out of Place* (1990), the researcher was able to contrast current site interpretive practices with conditions at Chittenango Landing during the early to mid twentieth century, after the canal had been relocated and the boat repair center had ceased operations. Hough's markedly different concept of a living landscape, more in keeping with the site as it existed prior to being set aside as a museum, provides a context for several recommendations concerning the improvement of present-day site interpretation.

Research and Analysis Methods

Over a period of five weeks in September-October 2002, the researcher conducted six participant observations of school group interpretive programs at Chittenango Landing, spending a total of eighteen hours on-site. During that time, he observed four 5th/6th grade programs, and one each of the 4th and 7th grade programs. Over this time period, four different educators were observed presenting the material, and most lessons were observed being presented by more than one educator. In this manner, it was often possible to account for variability between educators, enabling the researcher to distinguish common themes from different presentation styles. Three volunteers were also observed assisting with the hands-on activities. Copies of scripts for two of the lessons were obtained, for comparison to the actual presentations. Observations were recorded in a field notebook, and converted into more extensive typed field notes following each session. For the purpose of confidentiality, the museum educators'

names were replaced with "Educator One" through "Educator Four" in the field notes.

Additional research supplemented the participant observation study. Two brief informational videos (sent to schoolteachers prior to class visits) were reviewed. Copies of materials handed out to students in the various programs were obtained for examination as well. On 11 November 2002, the researcher also conducted a semi-structured interview with Educator One, who also serves as education coordinator at the museum. This interview addressed explored how the educational programs developed, program educational goals, and future plans for programming at the site. The interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As a supplement to this investigation, historical research was also conducted, emphasizing the twentieth century (post-canal era) history of the site. The purpose of this research was to obtain a more complete picture of site history, in order to ascertain what facets of site history were being presented to the children, and what items were being left out. Materials obtained from the museum archives included old photographs and postcards, the Cultural Resource Survey for the Visitor Education Center, canal boat museum newsletter articles about site history, and oral history tapes of two elders from the Chittenango Landing area. Additional notes, articles, and postcards pertaining to the Merrill-Soule cannery, which operated on the site for over 60 years, were obtained from the Town of Sullivan historical collections.

All field notes, notes on both videos, and the transcript of the interview with the museum education coordinator were coded. By means of microanalysis and constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), major themes emerged based upon material in the various coding categories employed.

Emerging Themes

Only One Past

One theme that emerged consistently from the presentations and activities observed was the concept that there was only one past condition at Chittenango Landing, namely, the canal era. Rather than presenting site history as a

chronological sequence of events, educators emphasized a static past at the site, a time when the Erie Canal was in operation and Chittenango Landing was an active boat building and repair facility. This presentation of the site's past as a "snapshot" is evidenced by an historic photograph of the site (circa post-1874) which, together with Sanborn fire insurance maps for Chittenango Landing, has been used as a template for site reconstruction. As Educator One explained to a group of home-schooled students visiting the site, "We're trying to make this picture come alive again" (Field Notes, 2002, p. 3). In this manner, the site's history is restricted to its condition during the canal era, its abandonment and burial after the canal ceased operations, and the site's rediscovery, exhumation, and reconstruction over the past fifteen years.

The 5th/6th grade programs included a slide show, in which an educator told children a story of how the site was excavated and reconstructed. The show began with a black and white photograph of the canal, with a dense stand of saplings and underbrush visible where Chittenango Landing is located today. The educator narrating the presentation then explained to the students how there was "nothing but trees, vines, and mosquitoes" when the site was "discovered" fifteen years ago. The educator would describe this forest as "jungle" and "like a rainforest", in a manner evocative of the setting for an Indiana Jones film. Educator One used hyperbole to emphasize the severity of the mosquito problem, noting that one could be carried off by the mosquitoes if he or she remained there for more than two minutes, and that there were a million mosquitoes at the site at the time of its rediscovery.

At the end of the slide show, the educator would invite the children to compare the reconstructed dry-docks (meticulously laid stone wall, new gates, well-groomed lawn) with the wooded thicket in the first photograph. What was implied, in the task of comparing the two photographs, is that reconstruction had transformed the site for the better. When the site was rediscovered, it was an abandoned and uninviting place. In Educator Four's telling of the story, the canoeist who first discovered the site couldn't walk far from the canal because there were "a lot of trees, a lot of underbrush, a lot of nature growing up there"

(Field Notes, 2002, p. 44). (i.e., civilized) again. As emphasized by both educators observed giving the slide show, reconstructing the site (particularly the dry docks) entailed rescuing the landscape from wild nature, and restoring it to the more orderly and inviting condition it supposedly would have had during the canal era.

Although the site had been abandoned after the canal shut down, Educator One explained to a group of 5th graders, "We decided to make it come alive again" (Field Notes, 2002, pp. 18-19).

The site's past, then, is not presented as a chronology of events, such as building constructions and modifications, or land use changes at the site. Indeed, dates pertaining to site history are rarely given during school programs. The past that is presented at the site is, instead, what it was like during the canal era, as shown primarily in one historic photograph from about 1875. One of the museum's treasures, this photograph features prominently in the 4th grade video, as well as in the slide presentations at the site. According to Educator One, the museum long held a goal of reconstructing all the buildings shown in the photograph, although that will probably never occur due to floodplain building restrictions. Reconstructing the site has been largely envisioned as bringing the current site in line with the photographed one. In fact, Educator One pointed out that a "Milk" sign hangs on the porch roof of the museum building today because a similar sign is visible on the equivalent building in the photograph (Field Notes, 2002).

Life at the site during the canal era is presented to visiting students through a variety of activities. A first-person interpreter, for example, tells each 4th and 5th/6th grade school group stories about her experiences as a canal boat captain in the late 19th century. A compare-and-contrast activity for 4th grade students involves matching tools used in the household today with items that performed similar functions in a household "in the 1800s". As Educator One indicated in the interview, this activity helps the students recognize that people in the past used different tools, yet needed to accomplish similar tasks. However, this activity also serves to convey an image of the past as static, rather than an evolving sequence of events.

Primary Sources – "The Real Thing"

Primary sources, defined as original materials from the past, include historic documents, photographs, and archaeological artifacts. Lessons on the identification and use of primary source materials are provided in both 5th/6th and 7th grade educational programming at the museum. These lessons are intended to complement New York State learning standards for 5th, 6th, and 7th graders. Educator One would often refer to the original copies of primary sources as “the real thing”, and she noted in the interview that she felt it important for students to experience these originals firsthand. Thus, while these primary source activities teach students how to identify primary sources and utilize them to learn about life in the past, they also enable the students to see “the real thing”. Original primary sources at Chittanooga Landing have a quality which reproductions do not: they were actually handled and used by people during the canal era, and can therefore serve as points of connection with that time.

In the 5th/6th grade primary source activity, for example, students had to match photocopies of original documents with either reproductions of artifacts, or actual artifacts (such as a rusted horseshoe or lump of coal) having little value. During the preliminary lesson, however, the educator also donned gloves, and held up original manuscripts for the children to see. At the end of the lesson, the educator explained to the children that the caulking mallet used in the activity was just a reproduction. Then, she removed the lid from an archival box, revealing the actual mallet which had been unearthed at the site, commenting that the mallet is one of a kind, and therefore invaluable. As Educator One explained in the interview, “I like to see the children’s eyes go ‘bingo’, when they see that caulking mallet that somebody used, a hundred and fifty years ago” (Education Coordinator Interview Transcription, 2002, p. 11).

The same caulking mallet the students view also appears in the slide presentation, where it is shown in a photograph, with an ungloved hand holding it, as if evoking the hand that once wielded it to repair a boat. The sound of the same mallet striking wood is also heard at the beginning of the 4th grade informational video, in which the viewer is invited to listen to sounds that might have been heard on the site in 1865. Children also view an

historic photograph – shown in the video as well – of someone using a caulking mallet. The fact that someone used it makes it “the real thing – it’s a primary source” (Field Notes, 2002, p.30, Educator One). Primary sources at Chittanooga Landing hold a certain power, a certain life of their own, because someone once used them. They are personal points of contact with the past, imbued with the life force of their original owners. As Educator Three remarked to students during an archaeology lesson, “Everything you find had a life – had somebody that used it and touched it” (Field Notes, 2002, p. 32).

What Students Are Not Told: Life at Chittanooga Landing in the 20th Century

Another theme that emerged during this study concerned an aspect of site history that is not presented to the students, namely, site history from the late canal era until the site’s excavation during the late 1980s. The slide show, together with interpretive material presented to school groups at the dry docks upon arrival at the site, imply that Chittanooga Landing fell into disuse following the closure of the Old Erie Canal in 1917. However, the area continued to be utilized, and inhabited, until 1972. The site had only been “abandoned” for about thirteen years when it was “rediscovered”. This history, presented below, has been drawn from material in the archives of the Canal Boat Museum, as well as the historical room of the Town of Sullivan. Historical materials available included oral history tapes of local residents, newspaper clippings, postcards, and a report on archaeological investigations on site. Historical research indicates a far more complex site history than what is currently being interpreted to school groups, a history which reflects manifold ways in which the site continued to play a role in the local economy following the close of the canal.

Soon after the canal ceased operation, the Chittanooga Landing site became part of a working farm. Horses, cows, pigs, and chickens were kept in a barn on the property during the first half of the twentieth century, while two canal era residences on the site remained occupied until 1972. During the twentieth century, many materials were also harvested from the site. The store/warehouse along the canal, for example, was cut in two. Half the building was scrapped, and the other half was hauled, with horses, tackle

blocks, planks, and rollers, to a spot behind the sawmill, where it was used as an icehouse. In addition to the relocation and modification of the store/warehouse building, dry-dock stones and canal boat planks were also taken away. The Beech Nut (a sunken canal boat whose remains are now preserved in the canal on-site) fell into disuse, and local residents removed wood from it. Then, in 1950, the State took stones from the dry-docks' walls, to use in construction of the New York State Thruway.

In 1997, the museum acquired an adjacent 0.7 acre parcel of land, which was the former site of the Merrell-Soule Canning Works. The cannery had been constructed on or about 1883, and had operated for more than six decades. The vegetable canning facility employed up to 250 people during its early years of production and figured prominently, both economically and socially, in the local area. A local newspaper article from 1936 (a copy of which is kept in the Canal Boat Museum archives), reporting on the razing of the main cannery building, commented that the factory was at one time the largest seasonal industry within the Town of Sullivan. While no historical postcards of the boatyard appear to have been made, three postcards in the Town of Sullivan historical collections show the cannery, and one postcard depicts posed cannery employees. Cannery statistics, postcards, and newspaper articles suggest that the Chittenango Landing area retained economic significance to the local community well into the 20th century.

Conclusions and Recommendations

J. B. Jackson's Model of Historic Interpretation Applied to Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum

Based upon the results of this investigation, the researcher proposes that, when museum staff referred to bringing the site "back to life again", they were speaking of restoring a particular past condition, the canal era, at Chittenango Landing. As students are told in the slide presentation, that past had been abandoned and buried, but had been exhumed and restored to life through archeology and reconstruction. J.B. Jackson, in "The Necessity for Ruins," describes a similar process from abandonment to a return to life as characteristic of how the past is interpreted at historic sites throughout the United States. This

approach "...sees history not as a continuity but as a dramatic discontinuity, a kind of cosmic drama. First there is the golden age, the time of harmonious beginnings." (Jackson, 1980, 101). In the case of Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum, this "golden age" corresponds with the time period when the Erie Canal was in operation. As Educator One explained in the interview, the site celebrates the Erie Canal and its role in the historical development of the United States. Chittenango Landing, in particular, "...tells about the common person: how the common person worked, how the common person lived. These were the people that made the United States, the common people. ...it was the common person that made the boats that took the immigrants westward, that brought the cargo from the west to the east" (Education Coordinator Interview Transcription, 2002, p. 9). As a re-created place from a golden era of democracy and industry, Chittenango Landing functions in a manner similar to Meinig's symbolic landscapes, which "...are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and feelings which bind a people together" (Meinig, 1979, p. 164). This past is made present through buildings that have been reconstructed on site, together with originals of primary source materials obtained through historical research and excavation. As observed in this investigation, these primary sources play an important role as points of personal contact with the canal era, helping to bring the past alive in the imaginations of students. They are "the real thing", because they were used by those individuals that kept the canal boat repair facility records or used a mallet to caulk a boat. They are relics of a golden age at Chittenango Landing.

According to Jackson, this "golden era" is always followed by a period of abandonment, "... when the old days are forgotten and the golden age falls into neglect", and then a time "...when we rediscover and seek to restore the world around us to something like its former beauty." The abandonment stage, according to Jackson, is a crucial part of this sequence. "There has to be...an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape" (Jackson, 1980, 101-2). Site interpretive programs for school students, particularly the slide show, also imply that the site had simply been abandoned

when the canal shut down. When it was rediscovered fifteen years ago, the site had returned to an overgrown, jungle-like state, full of “trees, vines, and mosquitoes” (Field Notes, 2002, p. 19, Educator One). In the interim, as slides reveal, the dry docks had been used for rubbish disposal, and many of the stones had been taken away. The students are not told, however, about the people who continued to reside on the site, about the farm operation, or about the adjacent canning factory which operated into the early 1950s. The site was not actually abandoned until 1972, after it had been acquired by the State of New York, when the two canal era buildings still standing on the property were demolished.

Michael Hough's Concepts of Fossilized History and Vernacular Community Applied to Chittenango Landing

What can easily be lost in the process of restoring a golden age, however, is both spatial continuity between a site and its surrounding landscape and temporal continuity between a site and its immediate past. As Lowenthal observes (1979, p. 111), spatial discontinuity begins when the historic marker is first placed: “When we identify something as old and we mark the site, we dissociate it from its surroundings, diminishing its continuity with its milieu.” Loss of temporal continuity, meanwhile, appears to be an inevitable by-product of a golden age interpretation model; as Jackson observes, “death” of the past (i.e. abandonment) must happen before the past can be restored to life. Along the way, events that might indicate a recent past not in conformity with the death/rebirth myth become minimized or ignored altogether.

In *Out of Place*, Michael Hough (1990) proposes the term fossilized history to describe what can result when “...change and adaptation to new conditions are precluded from the process of preservation” (Hough, 1990, 162). Historic sites then become fossils -- unchanging places, lacking a chronology and therefore ahistorical. As an alternative model that integrates the past and the present, Hough offers the concept of a vernacular community. Vernacular communities are distinguished by “...a sense of continuity. Throughout history buildings, squares, old walls, and paving stones – the fabric of urban form – have continued to be adapted to the conditions of

the present. It is part of the process of living” (Hough, 1990, 157). The vernacular community model aptly describes conditions at Chittenango Landing in the 20th century, prior to establishment of the museum. According to this model, decisions to harvest dry-dock stones for a highway or canal boat planks for a construction project were not tragic events, but simply manifestations of vernacular bricolage. In this interpretation, a living landscape is not one that has been raised from the dead (excavated and rebuilt) but one that has remained vital to the local community. Old materials, when no longer perceived as necessary for their original purpose, are put to new uses, just as medieval vellum was used and re-used for new manuscripts. The vernacular landscape becomes a palimpsest, in which wood lots contain old furrow lines, a barn contains timbers from an earlier cabin. The past remains present in traces everywhere, integrated and alive.

A drawback of applying Hough's model to historic site management and interpretation practices, however, is that doing so precludes the intentional establishment of places for the recognition of cultural identity through the preservation of cultural memory. Repeatedly, the education coordinator remarked on the value of Chittenango Landing for school students. School group interpretive programs at the museum offer children something history textbooks cannot -- a sense of history as hands-on, as present and accessible, in the form of artifact, photograph, and landscape. Based upon the results of this study, it is evident that programs for school groups at the site tell of life during a single canal era rather than offering a chronology of site history. It is also apparent that these programs neglect to connect the site to the surrounding landscape (including Chittenango Village, less than a mile away). However, as the education coordinator noted, unlike many historic sites that celebrate the lives of famous, and typically wealthy, Americans (such as Presidents' homes), Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum emphasizes the roles of common people, of blue-collar workers in American history. The Erie Canal certainly played a major part in American westward expansion during the mid-1800s. Chittenango Landing, one might argue, acknowledges and preserves a significant facet of the American experience. In fact, the museum is

the only reconstructed canal boat building and repair facility currently extant in the United States.

How, then, might concerns about fossilized history be reconciled with the value of Chittenango Landing as a place for cultural memory and identity? Based upon the results of this study, the researcher proposes that it would be possible to depict the canal era at Chittenango Landing without entirely sacrificing elements affording spatial continuity with the surrounding landscape or temporal continuity with 20th century history. New exhibits and signs, in conjunction with interpretive opportunities provided by the museum's new Visitor Education Center, would enable the museum's school programs to include references to the surrounding landscape, while also providing a sense of chronological narrative at Chittenango Landing.

Spatial continuity might be enhanced through the addition of museum exhibits and on-site signs which might be incorporated into existing school programs. For example, the Chittenango Lateral Canal, which connected Chittenango Village with the Erie Canal, crosses the museum site. This canal is not marked by a sign, and no reference is made to its presence during school tours, despite the fact that it played an important role in the industrial and economic development of Chittenango. Museum exhibits could also be developed depicting a timeline for the village alongside a timeline for the landing, or perhaps portraying Chittenango area businesses that thrived due to the presence of the canal nearby. Interpreting other nearby industrial sites, particularly the Merrill-Soule Cannery and perhaps also the Chittenango Pottery an eighth of a mile away, would also offer students a more complete picture of industrial operations at Chittenango Landing. As the education director observed, for example, the cannery was a very important part of the region's economic development, fostered by the presence of the Erie Canal. Many farms in the Chittenango region no doubt geared their production to meet the cannery's needs.

Temporal continuity might be enhanced through including aspects of site history not contained within the Chittenango Landing photograph, such as the Merrill-Soule Canning Works. With the completion of a new Visitor Education Center,

evoking the former cannery by means of both general appearance and architectural detail, an excellent opportunity is provided for integrating cannery history with current site interpretation. School groups could be invited to examine features of the Visitor Center, and their questions could be a springboard for an introduction to cannery operations. While the canal era drew to a close with the opening of the New York State Barge Canal, other activities continued at Chittenango Landing. The cannery, for instance, operated for more than thirty years after the canal closed. The demise of the cannery (partly demolished for building material, the rest destroyed in a fire years later) might, in turn, lead to a consideration of the loss of the original buildings on the site, which could offer opportunities for considering the changing economic and social conditions in Upstate New York in the 20th century.

Addressing these other landscape narratives at Chittenango Landing would enable the students to perceive how the cultural landscape has been continually in flux, and could lead to an awareness of how the perception of change is central to an understanding of history. Gathering stones from the dry-dock to build the New York State Thruway would be part of that history, as would the story of how a farmer in the 1920's sawed the original store building in two, and hauled half of it away to be used as an icehouse. All the stories of Chittenango Landing, of the people who inhabited the land, or simply used it for one means or another, belong to the site's past. Bringing that past back to life would require as many of these stories as possible, rather than solely evoking the golden age of the canal era as shown on an historic photograph, and trying to make the photograph come alive again.

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