



DOING WOMEN'S HISTORY IN PUBLIC



A HANDBOOK FOR
INTERPRETATION AT MUSEUMS
AND HISTORIC SITES

HEATHER HUYCK

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Doing Women's History in Public

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Heather A. Huyck

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Note: Throughout this book, NPS is National Park Service, NHL is National Historic Landmark, NRHP is National Register of Historic Places; NHP is National Historical Park; NHS is National Historic Site; NB is National Battlefield; and NCWHS is National Collaborative for Women's History Sites.

Introduction

When I was a child, my mother mercilessly dragged my sister and me to historic sites—to Ephrata Cloister, with its wooden pillows, and to Mesa Verde, where we climbed a ladder up into rock-walled rooms whose ancient denizens seemed so close. I loved museums and went to the Smithsonian so often I memorized its colonial American exhibits. I wanted to share these amazing places with others. Sadly, I found that my enthusiasm for public history was not shared by many faculty members when I began graduate school. Fortunately, Dr. Sara Evans, a protégé of the pathbreaking women’s historian Dr. Gerda Lerner and even as deeply committed to women’s history, joined the faculty and became my advisor. Since then, my career has been to build bridges between academic and public history, specifically to encourage and strengthen women’s history as integral to American history. In addition to working for the National Park Service (NPS) and the House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, I have taught at the College of William and Mary and been a board member/president of the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites.

While working for the NPS, I visited Gettysburg National Military Park. At the Snyder farm near Devil’s Den (where especially heavy fighting had taken place), the interpreters were using Living History techniques to convey the history by wearing nineteenth-century clothing and having pigs and kittens again living there. A senior NPS historian had gruffly asked me, “What is a Living History farm doing in the middle of a battlefield?” I told him I didn’t know. Interpreters portrayed how the battle affected the Snyder farm and its family, presenting a compelling perspective on a battlefield I’d visited often. I returned with a question for him—“What was a battle doing in the middle of a family’s farm?” I then understood that battles were often fought on family farms, profoundly affecting the farm women and men whose lives and livelihoods then changed drastically. The Civil War affected the 4 million enslaved African Americans (and nearly half a million free Blacks) who fought for their freedom. Wars are more than battlefields; they include women manufacturing munitions and fighting on the other home front.

History has both acute and chronic aspects, the dramatic unique events as well as the subtle but crucial slogs, trajectories easily missed. Women’s history includes the *traditional* category of domestic/biological reproduction of family and culture; the *underappreciated* but constant category of livelihood production to gathering, farming, industry, and technology; and, as *essential* a category, the production of the social glue of numerous and diverse organizations and communities that support and supplement the first two categories. Women have built the third category powerfully with Puritan prayer circles, abolition petitioners, suburban women’s clubs, Girl Scouts, and dinners of U.S. women Senators, from Black neighborhood improvement groups to the American Red Cross. Our accomplishments in all three sectors are awesome, if unseen. Our history needs to document and share these categories. We would not have our country without them. Without us!

Several National Park Service historians once kept a list of parks we believed lacked any women’s history, which we whittled down until only Alcatraz Island in California remained. Actually, women and girls lived there as the wardens’ families, and the male prisoners had women in their lives. Women’s stories and objects have been found in every museum and historic site. Happily, the appreciation for women’s history has grown exponentially in the past forty years.

Just as the larger discipline of history has accepted new forms of evidence that extend our ability to study more fully many different groups. Women's history has also become a lively field with a strong knowledge base. Seen through the lens of race, ethnicity and class, region, religion, gender roles, and/or LGBTQ communities, women's history is exciting, diverse, and transformative for American History. Three important women's history lines of inquiry focus on the social construction of gender that sees gender as culturally defined; the benefits of tangible resources for research and interpretation; and intersectionality, the recognition that we all experience varied aspects of identity simultaneously. For example, Black women are not African Americans one moment and women another, as both attributes are profoundly intertwined.

Those of us who work in museums and historic sites have amazing opportunities to welcome literally millions of people long past their school days with stories of women (and men) using the objects, buildings, and landscapes we interpret. The Statue of Liberty embodies a proud female proclaiming our promise to the world. Women's quilts and baskets reveal great artistry. House museums from extravagant to humble demonstrate female agency. We can convey women's lives and accomplishments in seemingly small but critical artifacts used daily—wood-handled pastry blenders, beaded moccasins, hand-cranked sewing machines, and typewriters, to name a few. We should welcome everyone to come discover the women who shaped this country in often-unappreciated ways. We also need to present the diversity of women's lives and honor women whose lives were stunted by circumstances far beyond their control. Their stories deserve to be shared just as those of famous women are. Examples from many museums and sites have been included here to show their wondrous variety and to encourage the identification of similar ones in your museum or historic site.

Interpretation engages us with the past and helps us interpret the women and girls who made us who we are. It helps us discover women we did not expect and so enlarges our worlds. Interpretation provides quality connections with visitors using professional programming and products, so they encounter historic women, their lives, and their accomplishments in their historic context. This book provides a strategic approach, specific tools, and numerous sources to interpret women's history based on three elements:

- *Significance*—why women's history matters and the importance and purpose of fully interpreting women at museums and historic sites—the emotional element;
- *Knowledge base*—the foundation for women's history preservation and interpretation through mastery of existing research and completion of new research and investigations—the intellectual element;
- *Tangible resources*—the preservation of physical evidence—the objects, buildings, structures, and landscapes—that shaped American lives and help to make the women's history interesting, vibrant, and accessible—the physical element.

Interpretation melds the other three elements together. With *interpretation* we can share these stories, bring together these crucial elements, together appreciate the women (and men) who came before us—even the scoundrels. We all construct our own understanding; good interpretation nudges us to new ones based on *significance* so that we appreciate women more, *knowledge base* so we comprehend them intellectually, and *tangible resources* so we encounter their physical historical elements. Here, interpretive programming includes all the programs and products from traditional house tours to staged suffrage debates to exhibits, books, and reproduction dolls—as well as all things digital. It's every way that museums and historic sites share past women with present people.

Chapter 1 of this book discusses the question of significance. Why does women's history matter? Why is it important to recognize and incorporate women into museums and historic

sites? Chapter 2 discusses basic research that every organization needs for a solid foundation in women's history. Chapters 3 through 5 present primary sources that historians use for research—the written, visual, and oral sources. Chapters 6 through 8 discuss women's interactions with the tangible resources—landscapes, architecture, and objects—that comprise museums and historic sites. Chapter 9 provides the basics of preservation that cares for tangible resources. Finally, Chapter 10 combines these elements with current interpretive approaches for visitors to provide hospitable and inclusive interpretation at your historic locale for stronger visitor experiences of women's history. Note the emphasis of working *with* visitors. Finally, the Tools in each chapter cumulatively build locale-specific women's history interpretation that is useful everywhere. The Bibliography lists sources by different categories.

This book is deliberately full of many examples and designed to encourage *everyone* engaged in interpreting the women's history found in museums and historic sites with the public and everyone interested in women's history. May it help you to find, research, preserve, and interpret the many women whose history is associated with your locale and to respond to skeptics of the benefits of doing so. Telling the whole story responds to concerns of public relevance and attraction. I have spent decades searching for—and finding—women's history that is *not* just a sliver of the American history pie. It appropriately includes everyone, for women intersect with every other human group. Let's tell the whole story together.

Cheers, Heather A. Huyck

Part I

Significance

Watch a young girl wearing a long dress with a straw hat on her head, carrying a basket as she walks past houses, shops, and stocks, lost in her thoughts as she considers life in a colonial village. As a visitor to Colonial Williamsburg, she smells wood fires, hears church bells, and sees women hawking their gingerbread. Stepping carefully, she may imagine she has successfully time-traveled back into history. She hasn't. She is encountering another girl's life centuries earlier and appreciating all the women who preceded her.

Determining Significance

We save what we believe is important and what we want to share with future generations. In other words, we preserve those things we consider significant. Often events or causes we understand in tangible resources—landscapes, architecture, and objects—from the Great Plains to the Statue of Liberty to grandfathers' leaded. Things we find unimportant are infrequently left to decay, yet while we invest huge sums to protect those we value, inherent in our decision of the significance of places is our identification with them—how we remember them or learned about them. Each generation has key moments and stories that lose their potency when their last witnesses die, whether the 1941 Pearl Harbor bombing, or hospital wards filled with women dying from septic pregnancies before 1973, or the 1969 Woodstock festival. Some events and forces become woven into our nation's self-understanding while others vanish. When subsequent generations lose connections, maintenance of significance can be quite difficult. Ritualized memories such as commemorations of centennials can revive our sense of significance as the 1976 Bicentennial did, but much still gets lost. Historic homes succumb to termites and neighborhoods to urban renewal.

To decrease such physical losses, in 1966 the National Historic Preservation Act that established our nation's preservation program used "significance" as a core concept, as elaborated by the regulations that implemented this crucial law. Furthermore, preservation decisions often hinge on the "period of significance," the most important era within the longer history of a building. Often coinciding with the time when the most important person(s) associated with it were present, the "period of significance" has practical effects because it guides which building elements will be restored, thrown away or replicated. Significance reflects powerholders and national debates. The February 2006 designation of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham where four young Black women were murdered as a National Historic Landmark came only with greater respect for and political potency of African Americans in this country. Finally, significance changes as decisionmakers do. Greater numbers of women historians in politics and in higher positions in academia, museums, and historic sites, as well as men sympathetic to women's history, have been crucial for greater recognition of the significance of women's history.

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Why Women's History Matters

Watch a young girl wearing a long dress with a straw hat on her head, carrying a basket as she walks past houses, shops, and stocks, lost in her thoughts as she considers life in a colonial village. As a visitor to Colonial Williamsburg, she smells wood fires, hears church bells, and sees women hawking their gingerbread. Stepping carefully, she may imagine she has successfully time-traveled back into history. She hasn't. She is encountering another girl's life centuries earlier and appreciating all the women who preceded her.

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We save what we believe is important and what we want to share with future generations. In other words, we preserve those things we consider significant. Often events or values are embodied in tangible resources—landscapes, architecture, and objects—from the Great Plains to the Statue of Liberty to grandmother's teapot. Things we find unimportant are frequently left to disintegrate while we invest huge sums to protect those we value. Inherent in our decision of the significance of places is our identification with them—how we remember them or learned about them. Each generation has key moments and stories that lose their potency when their last witnesses die, whether the 1941 Pearl Harbor bombing, or hospital wards filled with women dying from septic pregnancies before 1973, or the 1969 Woodstock festival. Some events and forces become woven into our nation's self-understanding while others vanish. When subsequent generations lose connections, maintenance of significance can be quite difficult. Ritualized memories such as commemorations of centennials can revive our sense of significance as the 1976 Bicentennial did, but much still gets lost. Historic homes succumb to termites and neighborhoods to "urban renewal."

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“Doing Women’s History in Public provides a clear step-by-step strategy to guide the reader in gathering and managing the information on their site’s significance and in compiling a knowledge base to support interpretation and education programs and preservation of its tangible resources. Doing Women’s History in Public is a major addition to the American Association for State and Local History’s book series.”

—Stephanie Toothman, PhD, former associate director and keeper of the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service

“What an invaluable resource! Every museum and historic site in the country should rush to acquire a copy of this remarkable book, which will soon prove indispensable to all.”

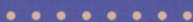
—Mary Beth Norton, Mary Donlon Alger Professor of American History Emerita, Cornell University

“Doing Women’s History in Public is an indispensable guide for anyone working in the field of public history. Indeed, it is necessary reading not only for public historians but also for traditional academics so that we all can find those on the margins and understand not only their lives but also the ways their presence alters the broader stories we can tell.”

—Sara M. Evans, Regents Professor Emerita, University of Minnesota; author, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*

Women’s history is everywhere, but while present at every museum and historic site, it remains less than fully interpreted in spite of decades of vibrant and expansive scholarship.

Doing Women’s History in Public: A Handbook for Interpretation at Museums and Historic Sites provides arguments, sources (written, oral, visual, and tangible), and tools for finding women’s history, preserving it, and interpreting it with the public.



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Cover image: This quilt attributed to African American artist Anna Jane Parker appears to be a diagonal block design but is actually a classic Log Cabin pattern, demonstrating the complexity, fascination, and power of women’s history as American history. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.