

Breaking the Fourth Wall of Living History: When Inaccuracy Makes for Good Interpretation

by Tyler Rudd Putman

After participating as a guest scholar aboard the thirty-eighth voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan* in the summer of 2014, I faced a dilemma. I had proposed both studying the waterproof garments worn by mid- and late-nineteenth century whalers and sailors and trying to recreate some of these garments. There's plenty of evidence about these things, including documentary accounts, visual sources and surviving objects. Thanks to nineteenth-century recipe books, there are a lot of documentary sources explaining how to waterproof a plain canvas jacket or a pair of trousers.



The accurate and inaccurate meet in the act of recreating historical waterproofing. Photograph by Tyler Putnam.

But the devil was in the details. These recipes often included toxic ingredients, such as “sugar of lead,” white vitriol, litharge, white lead and benzene. People in the nineteenth century were aware of the problems and caustic effects of these ingredients. A period manual explained that “great care must be taken as regards the sugar of lead, not to leave it where children or any persons ignorant of its qualities can

get access to it, as it is a powerful poison.”¹ However, these ingredients, when properly handled, resulted in relatively non-toxic waterproof garments whose water-resistance seemed worth the risk.

Ingredients for less caustic recipes included substances now impossible to purchase on the retail market. These included spermaceti (a fluid from the head cavity of the now-protected sperm whale) and caoutchouc (raw natural rubber). So what's an experimental archaeologist and living historian to do?

Rather than craft a long essay on how I have attempted to recreate period recipes with relatively non-toxic ingredients and simpler processes, I want to share here how a project like this might be integrated into living history interpretation. Much of the actual work of recreating the past as it appears in living history museums happens behind the scenes and is based on modern technology.

Can inaccuracy make for good interpretation?

As I was working on my waterproofing project, I thought a lot about how it might be presented at a living history museum as something more than a finished product worn by an interpreter. It is possible to recreate the appearance of a waterproof garment from the nineteenth century, but in almost every case, one has to make safety and practicality compromises about ingredients. The “spirit of wine” noted in one recipe led me to its more chemically pure contemporary form, ethyl alcohol. And that led me to the sort of denatured ethyl alcohol you can purchase at an affordable rate at just about any drug store. Even in the most basic chemical sense, the ingredients become inaccurate. The process of recreating period waterproofing, like the work involved in creating many other reproductions, involves using modern materials and tools for safety and expediency.

Should behind-the-scenes work be hidden?

We've supposedly entered the era of the participatory museum. This is the sort of museum where we invite visitors to share in a conversation rather than listen to didactic instruction or interpreter monologue. It is the sort of place where authority resides as much with the audience as the museum staff.² But converting to this new way of interpreting the past is easier said than done when it comes to living history museums. After all, most professional living historians would probably argue that they need to maintain substantial control over living history environments, ensuring that a visitor's experience of the past is as "authentic" and uninterrupted as possible.

Of course, many living history professionals would also admit that truly experiencing the past is impossible—it's gone for good. And we all have stories about visitors who love locating (and photographing) anachronisms on a site and attempting to trip up first-person interpreters. But I would argue that, rather than demonstrating the immaturity of visitors or their unwillingness to suspend disbelief, this sort of behavior allows visitors to feel just the sort of authority that the participatory museum proposes.

The average visitor may not know anything about eighteenth-century wheelwrighting or nineteenth-century church rituals, but he or she can spot a cell phone in an interpreter's hand from a mile away. Though we might imagine that such visitors leave a site disappointed at having had an impure experience of the past, most come away with a sense of victory, having used their own skills to outwit the museum.

How can we turn this inclination into good interpretation? How can we make inaccuracy an interpretive tool?

One way is by making the hidden processes that run a museum, even—and—especially the inaccurate ones, part of the interpretation. Visitors are often as fascinated by the things we do behind the scenes as what we do in front of them. For instance, special tours of Colonial Williamsburg's costume shop,

where modern seamstresses sew colonial clothing by machine, frequently draw as many visitors as the period milliner's shop in the Historic Area.

The restoration of the *Charles W. Morgan*, the ship on which I sailed in 2014, is another example. Restoring the *Morgan* on a timely schedule meant visitors had to step around extension cords and power tools in the hold of a ship normally maintained as an accurate microcosm of nineteenth-century whaling. Mystic Seaport could have pursued the restoration effort in a hyper-accurate fashion, bringing the *Morgan* back to ship-shape using only hand tools wielded by costumed tradesmen. While this might have made for productive interpretation, visitors still seemed to get a lot—maybe even more—out of seeing the modern work. They witnessed the decisions, compromises, and craft skills that contribute to restoring a period ship.

Self-conscious living historians are often too careful and gloss over the behind-the-scenes portion of their world. I was part of a large reproduction project in 2013 that was interpreted by third-person living historians. The project went slightly awry. I avoided telling visitors about some of the problems we encountered, such as dealing with international customs and peculiarities of modern linen bleaching, fearing that such confessions would undermine visitor confidence and destroy the perceived authenticity of our undertaking. Now, however, I wonder if talking about the modern concessions we had to make—the inaccuracies of our project—would have been an exciting and interesting way to engage visitors. It might have been an opportunity to demonstrate that the work of historians (including living historians) involves choices, competing interpretations, and compromises, rather than just cold, boring facts.

Inaccuracy makes for good interpretation precisely because it draws such sharp contrasts between the past and our present. Interpreting of and making of waterproof clothing at a living history site will necessarily involve inaccurate materials and processes. But it would also allow an interpreter—perhaps a non-costumed staff member—to discuss just why we can't reproduce historical waterproofing in a period setting.

We know a lot more about the toxicity of lead now, and we've decided to stop hunting sperm whales, despite the almost unique qualities of spermaceti.

This is a risky proposition, showing a museum's inaccurate underbelly to visitors whom we presume might be all too ready to abandon us once they realize we're a big fraud. But if we give them a chance, I think visitors will be more loyal, and more curious, than we might think.

Living history sites have spent more than half a century attempting to evoke as authentic a sense of the past as possible. But now, visitors come to our museums expecting to be part of the conversation, not simply passive students. Now might be just the right time to break the fourth wall of living history and bring visitors backstage, letting them be part of the creation of an accurate environment, even if it means showing them just how "inaccurate" we all are. ☞

Endnotes

1. Sarah Hale, *The New Household Receipt-Book* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1854), 133.
2. Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010). This work is available for free online at <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>. (accessed 2/22/16).

About the Author

Tyler Rudd Putman is a Ph.D. candidate in the History of American Civilization Program in the Department of History at the University of Delaware. His living history experience includes work at Colonial Williamsburg, Colonial Michilimackinac, National Park Service sites, and as a tailor of historical clothing. His website is www.tylerruddputman.com.

Upcoming on the ALHFAM Schedule

Be sure to look at the home page of the ALHFAM website to see the latest news about upcoming conferences and workshops, sponsored by ALHFAM. Coming soon in 2016 are:

- ALHFAM Annual Meeting & Conference, June 12-16, LSU Rural Life Center, Baton Rouge, LA
- Western Canada 2016 Regional Meeting, August 26-27, hosted by The Innisfail & District Historical Village
- Western Regional Meeting, *Pursuing the Future while Protecting the Past* to be held in Eugene, OR September 21-24, 2016
- 2016 New England Regional Conference, Oct. 22-23, 2016, Coggeshall Farm Museum, Bristol, Rhode Island
- 2016 Midwest/MOMCC & Mountain Plains Joint Regional Meeting, November 3-5, Mahaffie Stagecoach Stop & Shawnee Town 1929, Olathe, KS