

The most developed and innovative thrust of the triad was indigeneity. This was evident throughout the Opening Ceremony, an overall focus on Hawai‘i, and specific sessions that looked at continental Native American communities. These included “Poston’s Tribal History,” which featured speakers from the Japanese American led Poston Community Alliance and the Colorado River Indian Tribe, and “Shared Histories,” which looked at the experiences of Native American National Park Service employees. I found the trio of live-streamed programs on the history of Unanga’s incarceration and war crimes to be very compelling, as they offered a new look at World War II incarceration histories.

I would speculate that constraints of time, capacity, and funding shaped the curation of *Tadaima 2021*. This is best demonstrated by the reliance on pre-existing programming that could be repackaged under the umbrella of *Tadaima*. Many of these other programs, along with *Tadaima* itself, were funded by the National Park Service’s Japanese American Confinement Sites (JACS) grant program. JACS funds help to support historic preservation, oral history projects, community education projects, and more related to the confinement sites. As Morita presented in the opening ceremony, this source of funding continues to tie the histories of Japanese American pilgrimages and redress to an ongoing process of community healing and collective memory. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs, I find that pilgrimages are best understood not as academic history making (although both formal historians and claims about the past that would be supported by an archive are present) nor as individual genealogy (although sometimes genealogical workshops are included in pilgrimage programming), but as collective memory, a living and socially co-constructed project.<sup>5</sup> As such, *Tadaima 2021* can intervene into how that collective memory evolves, in this case to expand towards identity, indigeneity, and intersectionality. I hope we will one day see that *Tadaima* helped to shape, and is shaped by, a broader historiographical turn to contextualize the Japanese American incarceration history into a longer history of state violence and racial solidarity amongst people of color.

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“Townsend’s” YouTube Channel. Jon Townsend, primary host. 2009-Present.  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/jastownsendandson>.

For the past twenty years, I’ve been familiar with Townsends as an Indiana-based business that makes and sells historical reproductions to reenactors and historic sites. James Townsend founded the company in 1973, and it remains in the family’s hands, managed primarily by his son, Jon Townsend. Among the many small

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* trans. Lewis Coser (1950; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 31.

businesses specializing in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century goods, Townsends is the largest domestic operation and has perhaps the widest customer base. As a result, their reputation as a vendor is mixed: known for appealing printed catalogs and good customer service, they also produce reproductions that are meant to be affordable for customers yet profitable for the company, resulting in occasional compromises on historical accuracy. Much of their clothing, for example, unlike garments of the eighteenth century, is machine-sewn to standard modern sizes rather than hand-sewn to personal fit.

But over the past few years, in conversations with visitors where I work at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, Townsends has come across my radar for a new reason. Recently the Revolution has enjoyed a currency in popular culture thanks to *Hamilton: An American Musical* and AMC's television show *TURN: Washington's Spies*. As those enthusiasms have waned slightly, I've kept track of what people seem to be watching and reading about the Revolution. And, increasingly, visitors began to mention "that guy on YouTube who does historical cooking." That guy, it turns out, is Jon Townsend.

Townsends's YouTube channel is a relatively old one, with its first video—of Jon Townsend modeling one of the company's reproduction Revolutionary War coats—appearing in February 2009.<sup>1</sup> Relatively quickly, the videos evolved from simple product promotional pieces to minutes-long mini-documentaries. In October 2011, Townsends dropped the first video in what was then called "18<sup>th</sup> Century Cooking with Jas. Townsend & Son," a discussion of Revolutionary War soldiers' rations.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Townsends has released hundreds of videos about early American life, work, and food. And people are watching, including on a new subscription-based website, Townsends Plus.<sup>3</sup>

Measuring the popular impact of the free channel beyond my own anecdotal evidence is somewhat difficult, but the numbers alone are staggering. As of March 2022, the channel has 1.82 million subscribers and over 232.5 million views of its videos.<sup>4</sup> Benchmarking these numbers against YouTube competitors is challenging because of the sheer number of history-related channels out there. There are certainly history-related channels with much larger viewerships (History, or the History Channel, is approaching 3 billion individual video views).<sup>5</sup> But to take one obvious example, we might compare Townsends with the channel of Colonial

1 Townsends, "Revolutionary War Continental Coat," February 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVsZ8WXV3Us>.

2 Townsends, "18th Century Soldier's Rations - Cooking Series at Jas Townsend and Son SrEr," October 31, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUtrZHS3wQ8>.

3 This site began in 2021 and was not studied for this review. Townsends Plus, <https://townsendsplus.com/>. As useful reflection on the history of the company's YouTube presence is "The Man Behind Townsends: The 'How and Why' Behind a 14 Year Old YouTube Channel," February 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=up6GNDDTllg>.

4 "Townsends" YouTube channel, "About" tab, <https://www.youtube.com/user/jastownsendandson/about>.

5 "History" YouTube channel, "About" tab, <https://www.youtube.com/c/HISTORY/about>.



A screenshot from Townsends's first Youtube cooking video, issued in 2011. (Courtesy Townsends, "18th Century Soldier's Rations—Cooking Series at Jas Townsend and Son SrEr," YouTube)

Williamsburg (a fine channel in its own right), which has 159,000 subscribers and 4.59 million views.<sup>6</sup>

If you're as staggered by that as I was, what these channels have in common might reassure you. Both produce content-rich videos with high production value. And both are pretty good history. Watching a Townsends video is like experiencing a relatively good (if necessarily unilateral) interpretive experience at your favorite historic site. But in short, what the numbers tell us is that Townsends is reaching something like ten times more subscribers and fifty times more viewers on YouTube than what is probably the best-known early American historical institution in the country. In thirteen years and with this much visibility, just like historic sites, the channel has not been without controversy. In 2017, Townsends came under attack for a video created in collaboration with Mount Vernon about an eighteenth-century dessert called "Orange Fool" which many commenters on both sides of the American political spectrum interpreted as a critique of then-President Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup> In a follow-up video, titled "The Intrusion of Modern Politics On Our YouTube Channel," Jon Townsend offered a candid take and his heartfelt

6 "Colonial Williamsburg" YouTube channel, "About" tab, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ColonialWilliamsburg/about>.

7 Townsends, "A Dessert Fit for the Washingtons" [note that the video was retitled], July 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2AG545Wlsg>. See also Talia Lavin, "The Eighteenth-Century Custard Recipe That Enraged Trump Supporters," *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-eighteenth-century-custard-recipe-that-enraged-trump-supporters>.



Jon Townsend and culinary historian Michael Twitty prepare barbecue. (Courtesy Townsends, “Food of the Enslaved: Barbecue, featuring Michael Twitty,” February 6, 2017, YouTube)

frustration with the situation which has now garnered 1.8 million views.<sup>8</sup> “Jon is like Mr. Rogers,” commented user MoonlapseVertigo on this video, “if I ever made him frustrated with me I’d feel bad forever.”<sup>9</sup> In short, Townsends maintains that modern politics have no place in their content or viewer commentary, and that this history should be approachable for everyone.

But, of course, all public history is political, even when it doesn’t map to a traditional partisan spectrum. The politics behind Townsends videos are just a bit harder to detect, not least because no single viewer (or reviewer) could possibly watch and analyze every video on the channel. What can be said is that Townsends has a tendency towards nostalgia, presenting early America most often as a world of crackling fires, babbling brooks, and delicious food, sometimes at the expense of darker early American histories of oppression, expropriation, and plunder. The videos and hosts sometimes rely on generalities unsupported by evidence and are regularly unprecise about how time and place might have impacted the subject under discussion (or how radically life in early America changed over time). But this is not (or not always) escapism to a quaint and whitewashed past, either. Townsends released three videos about early African American food with culinary

<sup>8</sup> Townsends, “The Intrusion Of Modern Politics On Our YouTube Channel,” July 6, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIirbjl\\_iqE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIirbjl_iqE).

<sup>9</sup> 2021 user comment on Townsends, “The Intrusion Of Modern Politics On Our YouTube Channel,” July 6, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIirbjl\\_iqE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIirbjl_iqE).



Jon Townsends and comedian Joe Pera discuss eighteenth-century cooking. (Courtesy Townsends, “Making ‘Thatched Roof Pie’ with Joe Pera—18th Century Cooking,” January 10, 2022, YouTube)

historian and interpreter Michael Twitty in February 2017. “Food of the Enslaved: Barbecue, featuring Michael Twitty” has over two million views.<sup>10</sup> And in another vein, in 2021–22, Townsends partnered with comedian Joe Pera, whose deadpan style of gentle humor somehow genuinely matches the channel’s quiet nostalgia while also satirizing it.<sup>11</sup>

What historical errors are on the YouTube version of Townsends are no worse than what you’d likely encounter in-person at an outdoor living history museum. On the whole, then, this is something relatively unique in public history (though, perhaps, not as much so in the world of social media). Public historians are rightfully proud of the level of trust the public invests in museums.<sup>12</sup> Townsends is a private historical business with a huge audience, but it is at least as reliable—as trustworthy—as many of the museums doing comparable work. And that should be about as reassuring as it gets when someone asks you if you’ve seen “that guy on YouTube.”

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<sup>10</sup> Townsends, “Food of the Enslaved: Barbecue, featuring Michael Twitty,” February 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwkRWIwZ43A>.

<sup>11</sup> For one example, see Townsends, “Making ‘Thatched Roof Pie’ with Joe Pera- 18th Century Cooking,” January 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6adp3fNmdl>.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Elizabeth Merritt, “Exploring Museums and Trust 2021,” October 5, 2021, Center for the Future of Museums Blog, American Alliance of Museums, <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/10/05/exploring-museums-and-trust-2021/>