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How Can We Make Digital History Sites Personal?

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How Can We Make Digital History Sites Personal?

Abstract
It's a question I've been asking myself a lot recently. Digital public history sites are springing up all over the web. There are snazzy ones with great content like The Antebellum Project, which showcases Bowdoin College's role in the coming of the Civil War. There are information and resource dumps like Ancestry.com that allow its users to see tons of different historical sources. There sites that use GIS like WhatWasThere and allow users to collectively document the world around them. Then there are websites that are digital exhibits built to accompany an actual physical exhibit - one of my favorite examples is this one by the Met on paintings that feature scenes from everyday life in America. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Theory, Digital History

Disciplines
Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments
Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com

TUESDAY, AUGUST 16, 2011

How can we make Digital History Sites Personal?

Or, are they already personal?

It's a question I've been asking myself a lot recently. Digital public history sites are springing up all over the web. There are snazzy ones with great content like The Antebellum Project, which showcases Bowdoin College's role in the coming of the Civil War. There are information and resource dumps like Ancestry.com that allow its users to see tons of different historical sources. There sites that use GIS like WhatWasThere and allow users to collectively document the world around them. Then there are websites that are digital exhibits built to accompany an actual physical exhibit - one of my favorite examples is this one by the Met on paintings that feature scenes from everyday life in America.

Each one of these websites presents a great learning opportunity. But...does each one of these websites present a similar ability for its users to find meaningful connections with historic ideas, objects, artifacts, events, and people? It seems that so much of interpretation at museums and historic sites relies on experience. You can see the artifacts in the museum and image the hands that *made* the uniform, or the persons who *drank* out of that cup and canteen. To use my favorite example, by visiting battlefields, you not only see the ground over which Pickett's Charge occurred, but also the farmhouse of the free African-American family who owned just a few of the fields that the Confederates charged over and died upon.

Can you have the same experience online? Does watching a video or uploading a picture create the same opportunities as talking to an interpreter? On one hand, it's probably good news that a video can never replace an actual human being. But what then of digital public history? Does the sense of 'discovering' history on your own, in your own home, and at your own pace make up for this lack of experience?

I think it does (or at least it does it for me). Digital history sites democratize history. They allow anyone with an internet connection to experience the thrill of research, the telling of a great story, or connecting with a physical site, even though it's through a computer screen and keyboard. Is that, in of itself, personal interpretation? I don't know yet. Let me know what you think in the comments.

Yep, I know - short post this week, but I'm moving! By the end of the month I'll be settled into my new apartment in Washington D.C. - the capitol of public history. As such, expect to hear my adventures and critiques of public history sites in the area. Before hitting up Washington D.C. I have some unfinished business with Gettysburg next week as I get back to the Civil War here on the blog...