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Risky Business Provocation and Interpretation

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Risky Business Provocation and Interpretation

Abstract

The fourth commandment of Freeman Tilden's six principles for interpretation is, "The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." This statement is both profound and problematic because the very heart of provocation is goading some sort of reaction from someone or something. Provocation usually has a negative connotation associated with it, like to purposely play the devil's advocate in order to upset someone. Of course, a museum's goal is never to intentionally upset visitors. However, at the same time, a museum may want to change the way visitors might think about a certain topic in order to view a familiar subject in a new light. There must be a delicate balance between provocation and instruction that provides visitors with enough information in order for them to make a personal revelation; to take away something that resonates with them. This is one of the challenges of the provocative interpretation that Tilden writes about in his 1957 book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, and one that I have witnessed at my summer internship at the Seminary Ridge Museum in Gettysburg, PA.

Keywords

Alex Andrioli, Interpretation, Museums, Pohanka Internship, Seminary Ridge Museum

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Risky Business: Provocation and Interpretation

By [Alex Andrioli '18](#)

The fourth commandment of Freeman Tilden's six principles for interpretation is, "The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation." This statement is both profound and problematic because the very heart of provocation is goading some sort of reaction from someone or something. Provocation usually has a negative connotation associated with it, like to purposely play the devil's advocate in order to upset someone. Of course, a museum's goal is never to intentionally upset visitors. However, at the same time, a museum may want to change the way visitors might think about a certain topic in order to view a familiar subject in a new light. There must be a delicate balance between provocation and instruction that provides visitors with enough information in order for them to make a personal revelation; to take away something that resonates with them. This is one of the challenges of the provocative interpretation that Tilden writes about in his 1957 book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, and one that I have witnessed at my summer internship at the Seminary Ridge Museum in Gettysburg, PA.



The purpose of interpretation is to get a visitor to desire to learn more about a subject, whether they feel the need to find answers for themselves or have the assistance of an employee. Tilden quotes a 1928 message from Ansel F. Hall, the Chief Naturalist of the National Park Service at the time, to further highlight his fourth principle of interpretation, "Others ... feel that it is more important that the visitor carry away with him an intense enjoyment of what he has seen, even though he has not accumulated many facts." In a place like the Seminary Ridge Museum, the employees want visitors to walk away from the museum as well-informed individuals who had positive experiences.

Unfortunately, the museum cannot control what visitors get out of their experience, no matter how many programs, tours, exhibits, or waysides that the museum puts time and money into. At the end of a visit, visitors' reactions will range from loving or hating the museum's efforts in interpretation among many other things. Just go on the Seminary Ridge Museum's Trip Advisor, Yelp, or Facebook pages. Provocation is risky business.

However, provocation also presents the opportunity to explore parts of history that often are overlooked. In the case of the Seminary Ridge Museum, the building itself was a hospital during the Battle of Gettysburg. The first day of battle raged all around the building and the museum covers the July 1st fighting in detail, but there is so much more to the museum than the battle. The Seminary Ridge Museum hones in on the human experience of the battle; many personal stories and artifacts allow visitors a glimpse at the physical and mental toll the Battle of Gettysburg took on soldiers and civilians. Medical history, religion before and during the Civil War, and even some women's history that highlights civilian nurses and the sister-nurses of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul are explored across the museum's four floors. The Seminary Ridge Museum takes a refreshing look at the Battle of Gettysburg in a town that has an intense hyper-focus on military actions.



As an intern at the Seminary Ridge Museum, I have been doing a lot of research for the museum to use in future projects and programs. I have not yet been an interpreter on the front lines for the museum, but I am currently developing a tour about the Confederate occupation of Seminary Ridge on July 2nd to July 4th. A lot of information about Confederate positions on the

ridge and Lee's retreat from Gettysburg is included, but the big picture of the tour is that there is so much overlooked history on Seminary Ridge. After July 1st, Seminary Ridge is cast aside as the action on the battlefield moves towards the east and south. So many important decisions were made on Seminary Ridge, from Lee's plans of attack on July 2nd and 3rd to his retreat starting July 4th. When I start to lead this tour in the upcoming weeks, I hope I can get the main idea of my tour across to visitors: Seminary Ridge was a hub of Confederate activity where decisions that affected the battle's outcome were planned and executed. Yet, there is significantly less information available about the area and there is still so much to learn.