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Concord's Wayside: Home of What?

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Concord's Wayside: Home of What?

Abstract

This summer, I have had the privilege of interning at Minute Man NHP in Concord, Massachusetts. My primary station here is the Wayside: Home of Authors. Right about now, you might be wondering what the Wayside is. That's alright, I didn't know what the house was until just this summer. The Wayside was the home of Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Lothrop (or Margaret Sydney) – all prominent authors in the 19th century. This house also stood witness to the “shot heard round the world” and provided brief shelter to a fugitive slave. This house is a gold mine of history, yet with all this history comes challenges.

Keywords

Historic Buildings, Interpretation, Literature, Minute Man National Historical Park, Olivia Ortman, Pohanka Internship

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Concord's Wayside: Home of What?

By [Olivia Ortman '19](#)

This summer, I have had the privilege of interning at Minute Man NHP in Concord, Massachusetts. My primary station here is the Wayside: Home of Authors. Right about now, you might be wondering what the Wayside is. That's alright, I didn't know what the house was until just this summer. The Wayside was the home of Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Harriet Lothrop (or Margaret Sydney) – all prominent authors in the 19th century. This house also stood witness to the “shot heard round the world” and provided brief shelter to a fugitive slave. This house is a gold mine of history, yet with all this history comes challenges.



Throughout the summer, I've been asked to think about the term provocation. In public history, this concept means telling stories about the historical site I'm working with in a way that will get visitors thinking. I want visitors to walk away talking about what they've just learned and hopefully posing new questions they want to answer. Essentially, I want the conversation to continue after people leave me. This is, perhaps, the most challenging part of my job at the Wayside.

When I write for the *Compiler*, I provoke by choosing a controversial topic, presenting both sides, and asking my audience to form their own opinions. I choose topics that are already important to people and give them a space to share their thoughts. It's the perfect recipe for provocation. The Wayside, however, does not have any spectacular controversy or figures that elicit strong sentiments. I also have to face the issue of location. The best and worst part about public history is that you have the house/battlefield/artifact in front of you. It's a great way to visually connect visitors to

the past, but it also means you have to base your discussion around this physical history. If I'm standing on one of the battlefields surrounding Richmond, I'm not going to give a talk on the fighting at Gettysburg. I might mention Gettysburg, but the majority of my talk is going to be about the battlefield you can see. Although Louisa May Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne both lived at the Wayside, neither one of them wrote their famous novels at the house. That means I can mention the books, but I shouldn't go into great detail (unless specifically asked). So how do I take visitors – usually with just a passing interest in the authors – through a house where the books they read were not actually written, and make them walk away eager to learn more?



Part of that answer lies in the stories I choose to share. Most people know the books, but very few really know the authors. I take people from room to room, weaving stories about the authors as people and allowing visitors to see snapshots of their lives in the house. In the front alcove, I talk about the Alcott girls playing pilgrims as they marched up the stairs to heaven (the attic). The sitting room is the perfect setting for a story about how Harriet Lothrop snares a husband with the use of her pen. When I get upstairs, I can't miss the opportunity to talk about Hawthorne's brief stint as an architect, and then point out the failures that caused him to give it up. These stories allow visitors to get a sense of who these authors were on a personal level and push my audience to reflect on how the personal lives of the authors may have shaped their books.

I also like to place the authors in time. I personally always forget that authors live in the real world, not some mythical realm that revolves around their books. Talking about what's going on in the world around the authors helps visitors think about what else these authors are dealing with. Nathaniel Hawthorne was living at the Wayside during the Civil War. It would be impossible for that to not impact his life. When I bring this up, it opens the door to questions about his views on the war, what level of involvement he would have had, and what he felt about slavery. I get the chance to point out that he actually wrote an article about the war titled, "Chiefly About War Matters," which was

published in the newspaper and is actually pretty funny. Visitors now have a new article they can read and thoughts about the author's life to go off and digest.

In these ways, I'm able to provoke my audience and keep them thinking. The Wayside and the families who lived there have more stories than I could ever share, but I don't have to be the only one talking. When I do my job right, it's my audience that picks up the torch and continues the search for answers. They are the ones who get to answer the question posed in my title: Wayside – home of what?