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# Behind the Plexi-glass Partitions: An Intern's View of American Museums

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Behind the Plexi-glass Partitions:  
An Intern's View of American Museums

Brittany Miller

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**Preface**

Almost six years ago, I began my journey as a public historian, examining musical instruments as a volunteer at the Plymouth Historical Society. I realized then the essential need for an understanding of history interpreted for the general public. I met countless people who hated history from the time they were children and had an incomplete perception of their own past. Through my conversations with these people, I discovered my ability to apply historical concepts within the context of the human experience. With this knowledge, I came to the Public History program at Western, where I applied these ideas and gained an understanding of the theories and practices of the field. While pursuing my coursework in Public History, I also discovered the Nonprofit Leadership minor and certification. Although I was competent in both fields, I found my passion to lie within the combination of the two. Throughout my experiences, I recognized a lack of cohesion between the roles of museums as organizations and as interpreters of history. Last winter I applied for the Summer Fellowship at Historic Deerfield in order to gain experience working with museums on the East Coast. My original intentions in attending the Deerfield Fellowship included writing a journal of my experiences and eventually presenting it as my honors thesis. The experience that I gained this summer not only introduced me to a wide array of museums, but opened my eyes to the possibilities within these organizations. The fellowship transformed my own views of the museum field, while furthering my own pursuits in regards to the combination of public history and nonprofits. I discussed this quandary with countless museum administrators and their replies were unanimous. If I could gain an understanding of how to make both components work within a single institution, I would have countless opportunities in the field to apply my expertise. With the support of my thesis committee, I have brought together aspects of my summer fellowship in order to present my

findings within the museum field. The journey will continue, as I will be completing my degree with an internship at the Henry Ford this spring. I hope to gain a greater understanding of how museums function as nonprofit organizations within American society. For tonight, however, I have opened the journals and collected my own archive of materials to share my summer experiences within these institutions. Although my perspective may not be shared by other members of the public history and nonprofit fields, my fellowship experience has taught me the value of discussion in the professional world. The presentation of this thesis is only a glimpse into the world of museums and their greater impact as cultural institutions.

**[Slide 1- Behind the Plexi-glass Partitions]** While searching through the many shelves of Waldo Library, I found a treasure. Like so many of the objects in the library, it was a book, but it was the title that captured my attention. It was called *Pastkeepers in a Small Place: Five Centuries in Deerfield, Massachusetts*. I have no idea how many of you have ever heard of Deerfield, but as of a year ago, it was completely unknown to me. No person could have convinced me that I would travel to this small town in rural Western Massachusetts and that my life would never be the same. You see, I applied for an internship, known as the Historic Deerfield Summer Fellowship Program in Early American History and Material Culture. While I expected to learn from the experience, gain an additional line or so for my resume, and have something to write my honors thesis about, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The summer initiated me into a world of culture, history, and objects. It provided me with an entirely new perspective of American museums and I hope to share some of this with you tonight.<sup>1</sup>

If you are like me, the word “*Pastkeepers*” jumps out of the book title as a somewhat innovative approach to history. Although I have never seen this word in any other context, it is a surprisingly appropriate title for my position in Deerfield. I told you that I had an amazing experience, but being a pastkeeper is more than a word for one’s resume. It is a lifestyle, and I had the privilege to share it with six other students from across the country. **[Slide 2- The 2007 Historic Deerfield Summer Fellows]** While we each came from different universities and programs, we were united in our mission to immerse ourselves in American museums. Each one of us became a pastkeeper with a different purpose. Ben studied Art History at Yale, while Adam and Rebecca focused in Anthropology and Archaeology. Jessica, Becky, and Michelle studied various topics in American history, and I was the lone Public Historian. By the end of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Batinski, *Pastkeepers in a Small Place: Five Centuries in Deerfield, Massachusetts* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 5.

the summer, we had developed unique roles within the group, which resulted in a fascinating cohesive understanding of these institutions and the keys they held to the past. Without the other fellows, I would never have found my own niche in the field, nor would I have gained the same depth of understanding of the pastkeepers.

While I would love to share with you every aspect of my experience and every fact that I learned, this would be an impossible feat. But, I can share some of the larger themes that I found to be prevalent in the museum field. During the summer, I not only had the opportunity to become part of a venerable history of pastkeepers at Deerfield, but one of a growing group of people trained there and sent into the rest of the world to make a difference. Although I lived and breathed Deerfield for two months, the fellows were sent out to museums throughout New England and the East Coast. We took with us the growing knowledge we had gained at Deerfield, and applied it to each place we visited. By the end of the summer, we had traveled to over thirty different institutions, which broadened our perspective of the field and the role of the pastkeepers.

Over the course of the summer, I found myself focusing on certain aspects of these museums. The most profound were those that revealed where the museum's audience and organization interacted. While I resided behind the scenes of these museums, I also had the opportunity to see the front lines, where the audience and staff meet. With insight into the workings of both sides, I was able to come to a fuller understanding of the needs of the audience and the challenges of the institutions meant to serve them.

As part of my role as a pastkeeper, I am a photographer. At nearly every place that the fellows visited, I took pictures and recorded experiences. This left me with an amazing amount of documentation for the summer, in addition to the many e-mails and journal entries that I

produced specifically for this thesis. After returning to school, I received more requests from people to see my photos than I ever expected. I would like to share some of them with you now. As I mentioned before, being a pastkeeper is a lifestyle which has infiltrated each photograph. Through this documentation, I hope to share my own perspective of American museums from behind the plexi-glass partitions.

**[Slide 3- The Street]** “Walking down the street of Historic Deerfield, one is greeted with a calm breeze, lovely historic homes, and a sense of place unlike any other. It is reminiscent of a time when the world was full of honorable men, genteel women, and hardworking children, looking towards a bright future in the great land of opportunity. The houses are full of beautiful objects, reflecting the best the world had to offer, and the people who lived in Deerfield are shown to be wealthy and successful. Everything is clean and in its rightful place, where no one is allowed to touch anything for fear of undoing the work of generations. While the interpretation of Deerfield may be applauded by many, it fails to bring the people and their stories to life. Contrary to the evidence presented to modern visitors, “the street” as it has been known for hundreds of years, has been a center of activity, human interaction, and sound. Regardless of the tranquil atmosphere that has been created, the sounds of Deerfield, as a citizen of past centuries would have recognized them, are long gone. The chattering of people, the bells of the church, the clash of war, and the music have disappeared from the street. However, these sounds have not vanished from all memory, as many have been preserved in the stories of Deerfield, housed in various forms within the library of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association. Hundreds of years of memories have been recorded by these people, in diaries, letters, autobiographies, reminiscences, newspapers, ephemera, and objects. Each person reveals a small piece of the greater puzzle, which, when compiled with the many stories that exist, create

a cacophony of sound. Only with this context is one able to fully appreciate and understand who these people were and create a fuller sense of what Deerfield has been, a living place full of activity and sound.”<sup>2</sup>

**[Slide 4- Living in a Museum]** As a resident of Deerfield, I know this to be true. The sounds of the past may be gone, however, the town is far from silent. At the beginning of this summer, I moved into an old house along the main street of Deerfield. I took down the plexi-glass from the windows, and began to live my life within the back rooms of one of the museum houses. When visitors came to tour the house, we were instructed to remain quiet, as to not disturb them. But who could possibly remain silent as strangers walk past the wooden door that partitioned off the living-quarters from the museum? Since my first day in Deerfield, I was just one of the ghosts living in the house. Everyday, I went about my business, waking up, making meals, and doing homework. **[Slide 5- The Other Side of the Museum]** We crept around the back to enter and exit, while the visitors remained oblivious to the world that existed on the other side of a nearly inconspicuous partition. While the front of the house was preserved for posterity and kept in the most pristine of conditions, the rest of the structure moved forward in time, influenced by its occupants. I lived in a confused world, where history is modern and modern is history. **[Slide 6- Living in a Museum Collection]** The kitchen served as the best example of this. Depending on which cabinet one would open, there may be usable dishes or accessioned items. Our favorite discoveries were those that fit neither category, but were simply the left-behind articles of the last permanent occupants of the house. This sense of confusion never completely left us throughout the summer, but began to define our lives as we became the gatekeepers between interpretations of the past and the people who lived it.

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<sup>2</sup> Brittany Miller, “Make a Joyful Noise: Singing, Dancing, and the Music of Deerfield” (Summer Fellowship Paper, Historic Deerfield Inc., 2007), 1.



A complex narrative exists within the museum, combining the evidence of the past with its current interpretation. Objects, buildings, and even the landscape are used by these institutions to create a very intentional exhibition of themes and events throughout history. The meanings are determined by the curators and the organization, however, the visitor has the unique opportunity to become involved in the interpretation of artifacts as well. Museum audience members bring with them knowledge from beyond the basic context of the institution, which is incorporated in their understanding of the exhibits as a whole. The reality of the museum experience is the conglomeration of these ideas, which opens the door for an education beyond any visitor's initial expectations.<sup>3</sup>

**[Slide 7- A Perspective of the Past]** While most visitors would expect to find a highly-structured exhibit within the museum site, this is not always the case. Museums choose a specific mission and perspective to share with visitors, selecting particular objects and information for the development of exhibits. However, this intentional interaction is only part of the overall experience. Throughout my own travels, I have found museums to communicate stories other than those they initially anticipated. Rather than focusing on objects, these inadvertent exhibitions concentrate on framing unique perspectives of larger themes not discussed in the average interpretive panel.<sup>4</sup>

**[Slide 8- The Uninterpreted Story]** Plimoth Plantation has created a dual mission, focusing on both the English settlement and Native presence within the local area. Throughout the site, the museum conveys the story of the interaction between the two groups, in addition to interpreting the lifestyle of the two distinct societies. However, from a single perspective from the fort of the English settlement, a very different story is being conveyed. Regardless of the

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<sup>3</sup> Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 30-33.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 38, 39.

intention of the institution, my perspective focused on war and the protection of the settlement. Even without a keen understanding of this moment in history, I gained a small seventeenth-century peek at the New World. This photograph shows the first of many windows into the past that I experienced during my travels.

**[Slide 9- The Moving Picture within a Frame]** The term “window” is not limited by the use of glass, but is rather the application of a frame. These form compositions, three dimensional moving pictures of the world. At Mystic Seaport, one encounters wide open views of the sea or closed in spaces below deck. However, a different kind of perspective is available to those who seek it. Looking out the stern of the ship is a wonderful view of the water and land beyond. Without the natural frame of the ship, one would rarely consider the relationship that exists between the object and the surrounding context of the land and sea. Such perspectives serve as an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of unknown worlds.<sup>5</sup>

**[Slide 10- The Initial Encounter]** Even beyond the unintentional framing of objects is the selection of larger themes and ideas. Upon arriving at Hancock Shaker Village, few have any idea what they will encounter along the way. The natural frame of the exhibition and collections building creates an ever-changing picture of the institution. I witnessed multiple visitors walk up to the fence and gaze forward for a full minute before looking around for a means to enter. Each person could gain a sense of place, even before going to buy a ticket or viewing the orientation video. Further context was provided to the visitors within the building, the frame of the structure itself providing them with a unique perspective of the site and orienting them to the many opportunities available during their visit.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Belcher, 40, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Belcher, 99-101.

**[Slide 11- The Stories of the Pastkeepers]** Over the course of my day at Hancock Shaker Village, however, I was encountered with a sad fact of the museum world. While the visitor may be taken in by the overall experience and want to learn even more information than is presented to them, few opportunities for this actually exist. But, as a pastkeeper and Deerfield Fellow, I was allowed past the regular partitions of the museum to experience the world beyond the exhibits. Within the main house, high above the rest of the town, is the attic. Along with the complex storage systems of the space were countless stories of challenges faced by the museum on a daily basis. The institution is faced with not only preserving and maintaining the building, but also learning the history hidden in the crevices of the structure itself. Without the confines of interpretive paneling, the staff told fascinating stories of a world unknown to the general population. Beyond the occasional ghost story were those that revealed past residents who visited the site and the challenges of interpreting a room to its original form. It was at this point that I realized that no disconnection existed between the pastkeepers and the interpreted history, as we discussed the challenges of working alongside the past to create a better understanding for the future.

**[Slide 12- The Interpretation of the Pastkeepers]** Mount Vernon is perhaps the best example of the work of the pastkeepers. Not only has history taken place at the site, but it has continued through the preservation efforts of countless volunteers over past centuries. The interpretation of the site is no longer limited to George Washington and his work, but a large focus of the exhibits is also placed on the organization that has worked to preserve this history. The tours of the estate not only include the changes made to the house by Washington following his brother's death, but also those completed in an effort to preserve the national landmark. After hundreds of years of restoration, Mount Vernon is more a product of the Association than

of Washington himself. The efforts of the pastkeepers are beginning to be recognized as part of our nation's history.

**[Slide 13- The Useful Side of History]** In case you have ever wondered, history is comprised of the evidence of human interaction. Interestingly enough, this includes my own adventures. During my stay in Deerfield, I was convinced that every attempt was being made to transport us back in time. Over the course of two months, we lost water, the ability to keep food fresh, and access to many of the basic tools that make civilized life possible. It took me most of my fellowship to realize that there were a couple of very simple ways to survive, all involving the knowledge that I had gained as a historian. Part of this included a mind for innovative approaches to survival. If milk went bad in three days, I needed to use it when it was fresh, and figure an approximate schedule of use such as existed before the invention of refrigeration. When we lost water, I had to walk a quarter-mile down the street to find a usable bathroom. While this took some effort, I found that volunteering to assist with cooking in that same facility was the perfect excuse to walk the distance. By the end of the day, I had assisted in the creation of an excellent chicken dinner made over an open hearth.

**[Slide 14-A Daily Dose of History]** While most days were not that extreme, the fellows did find it necessary to partake of history on a daily basis. Specifically, this meant that when food was meager and dinner somewhat tasteless, a group of us would walk down the street to the garden. There we would find delectable herbs and edible plants of heritage varieties that we could add to our meal. By the end of the summer, we were convinced that we could easily survive on a PBS series that sends a group of people to reenact a past era. Then we realized, we had already done it.

**[Slide 15- Eating the Collections]** The gardens seemed to follow us, no matter where we went. While visiting Strawberry Banke in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the curators were convinced that they were treating us to a new experience, eating a heritage garden salad. By this time, we had already been educated in the fine art of eating from the garden at Deerfield. However, this did serve as one of the most thoroughly interpreted sites in terms of horticulture. Regardless of the many fine buildings on the site, the gardens far outpaced them in terms of quality. The challenge as a pastkeeper in such a situation is in identifying the objects. Technically, we just ate them. The priceless collection is currently being consumed by the digestive juices of our stomachs. Fortunately, the gardens reproduce and grow, but it does serve as a startling realization in comparison to the formal collections policy set for the rest of the institution.

**[Slide 16- The Museum Experience]** Throughout the summer, we found it necessary to appreciate the experience, just as much as the objects we encountered. The Governor's Palace at Williamsburg is internationally recognized as a symbol of the institution and Virginia's history. However, most visitors only see the first two stories of the building. The third and fourth floors are off-limits. But, with the help of one of the curators, it is quiet amazing what you can see. These floors tell a different story, one of the governor's children and servants. **[Slide 17- Looking over the Town]** But even above this is the roof. From this vantage point, one can see the layout of the town, spanning far into the distance. **[Slide 18- Reproductions and Recreations]** The formal gardens of the palace spread out, and from our perspective we could appreciate the complex patterns formed. Again the question of collections was placed before us, as much of what we saw within and around the structure did not consist of objects, but other

evidence of the past. Reproductions and recreations formed an overall experience for us as visitors, rather than our encountering the real thing.<sup>7</sup>

**[Slide 19- An Awe-Inspiring Experience]** I have to admit at this point, that out of all the institutions that we visited over the course of the fellowship, my absolute favorite was Maymont Historic House Museum and Estate in Richmond, Virginia. Every single person in our group was very impressed with the interpretation and displays within this institution. Regardless of the 100-degree temperature with Virginia humidity, there was little that could stop us from exploring every single part of the estate that we could. The basement used exhibit paneling and display rooms to interpret the lives of the servants who worked in the house. The upper floors were part of a wonderful tour with the nicest little Southern lady that you would ever hope to meet. Along the way, we saw incredible objects, but since no cameras were allowed, you will just have to go and take a tour for the nominal donation of five dollars. And the best part was yet to come.

**[Slide 20- Exploring an Estate]** As extremely wealthy members of Richmond's elite at the end of the nineteenth century, the family that built Maymont entertained and enjoyed the tranquility of gardens. In their generosity, they bestowed their estate to the City of Richmond and only within the last twenty-five years has it been taken over by a nonprofit organization. Regardless of these changes, the gardens have retained their ability to awe the people who visit them. **[Slide 21- Capturing the Moment]** The water flows throughout the landscape, going beyond the classic water features commonly found on such estates. Part of this includes a gigantic waterfall, intended to be reminiscent of Japanese gardens. Personally, I am absolutely sure that they succeeded in their attempt. **[Slide 22- The Visitor Experience]** Maymont has achieved an unparalleled level of quality in terms of the total visit. The institution has not sacrificed history

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<sup>7</sup> Hein, 7, 8.

in order to obtain an audience, but has retained the simple beauty of the structure, landscape, and overall experience.

**[Slide 23- Interacting with History]** As part of my research at Deerfield, I read a book called *Romance, Remedies, and Revolution: The Journal of Dr. Elihu Ashley of Deerfield, Massachusetts*. This is the diary of Dr. Elihu Ashley, who lived in one of the houses just down the street from me about two hundred and twenty-five years before I arrived. The book was published only a couple of weeks before I came to Deerfield, making me one of the first people to hold it in my hands and read it in its entirety. I had a lot of other experiences reading letters and diaries of people who had lived hundreds of years before I came along. Opportunities to touch history are few and far between, even for a pastkeeper. Without the fellowship, many of my experiences from this summer would have remained a mere figment of my imagination.<sup>8</sup>

**[Slide 24- The Reproduction of a Town]** While visiting Plimoth Plantation during the second week of my summer, we were surrounded by reproductions. This made it possible for the objects to be used by the staff and provide a realistic interpretation of the past for visitors. Throughout the town and village, the general visiting audience obtains this idealized step back into history. As a pastkeeper, trained in the fine art of “Prowning” objects, this becomes a headache like no other. **[Slide 25- An Object Study]** Sitting along the side of the main street was a rather unique chair, which was a reproduction of one that we had analyzed previously in Deerfield. This meant that we had taken measurements, flipped it over, analyzed the wood and wear patterns, and pretty much performed every possible form of study to the object. When we found a reproduction sitting out in the open, with no plexi-glass and no curator to stop us, the

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<sup>8</sup> Elihu Ashley, *Romance, Remedies, and Revolution: The Journal of Dr. Elihu Ashley of Deerfield, Massachusetts, 1773-1775*, ed. Amelia F. Miller and A.R. Riggs (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 6-9, 16.

chair had no chance for escape. As a group, we were calm and composed, but way too excited about having the chance to sit in the chair. Each person took a turn, while the rest of us stood in a circle, analyzing the poor thing to death. I am sure that we were probably one of the most interesting displays at Plimoth that day, as quite a few visitors stared long and hard at us interacting with the chair.

Within this story, two very different audience members exist. Most of Plimoth is designed with the average visitor in mind, not the Deerfield Fellows. The level of knowledge that we had obtained over the course of the summer resulted in a very different motivation for our visit. This meant that our reaction and interaction while at the museum looked somewhat odd to everyone else. Most visitors will not become even slightly as excited as we were over a single object. Such excitement results in confusion, disbelief, and even anxiety on the part of volunteers, docents, and interpreters. During visits to other museums, I found it necessary to keep this in mind, as I found my interest and knowledge to actually hamper my enjoyment of the institution. Many of the museums are so intentional about meeting the needs of their audience members, that people that fall outside of the norm can actually upset the delicate balance of the overall interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

**[Slide 26- Navigating the Hazards of the Museum]** As a group of object-obsessed pastkeepers, the journey through decorative arts museums could be full of professional hazards. Certain pathways are intended for visitors to follow through exhibits and buildings, however, these are not always practical for those people who want to see and learn everything. While visiting the Peabody-Essex Museum, we found that this problem was taken to the extreme. Anything that was not specifically partitioned-off was placed on specially-colored mats. These were part of a complex security system, which activated when the weight on the area changed.

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<sup>9</sup> Belcher, 87.



This meant that there existed only a quarter of an inch difference between silent wanderings through the exhibit and mass chaos. While walking through the exhibit, I found myself concentrating more on where I was walking than on the actual displays.

**[Slide 27- The Pathways of the Estate]** Personally, I find that I prefer spaces that put less pressure on me as a visitor to figure out where I am or am not allowed to explore. Most museum exhibits are extremely intentional in the path of circulation within a specific room. Visitors are expected to follow specific routes in order to gain an understanding of the exhibit and see the main points of interpretation. Within a room that houses objects, the flow of movement is designed to pass by each of the highlighted interpretive panels and showcases. However, while visiting an estate or outdoor museum, such intentional paths for visitors are not always realistic. While at Monticello, I enjoyed exploring the grounds and the various sites on the estate. The biggest problem with this was that few barriers were specifically notated. **[Slide 28- View from the Inside Out]** While walking along the side of the house, I managed to find the one place not specifically barricaded, so that I was literally standing inside the porch, looking in the window as the visitors walked through the house on their tour. Upon turning around, however, I found one of the most interesting perspectives found on the entire estate. After that experience, I tried a little harder to be careful about where I went and where the unseen but implied barriers of these museums were located.<sup>10</sup>

**[Slide 29-Garden Pathways]** The gardens of Mount Vernon were a tad more specific in terms of pathways. They were intentionally designed not only to keep visitors from walking through the plants, but were also part of the historic layout of the site. **[Slide 30- Flora and Fauna]** Following these paths provided me with access to the interior sections of the garden, allowing me to explore the plants and wildlife without disturbing them. **[Slide 31- Narrow**

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<sup>10</sup> Belcher, 113-115.

**Pathways]** The formal gardens at Roseland Cottage maintained this same principle. However, the challenge for the visitor was not in navigating, but in managing to walk within the narrow pathways. In considering that the house is from the late nineteenth-century, it is difficult to imagine ladies walking with full dresses through such a maze of plants.

**[Slide 32- The Grounds]** In a larger sense, grounds serve as an extensive challenge for museums and visitors. In their most basic form, they serve as an exhibit on a much larger scale, spreading across the landscape. Buildings are placed within this context and must be connected to the overall concepts being interpreted by the museum. In the case of Shelburne Museum, the entire collections policy is based on the eclectic tastes of its founder. Overall, the visitor can gain a basic grasp of the local region and its many attributes. From a practical standpoint, no part of this concept ever said that it would make perfect sense. **[Slide 33- The Importance of Goal-Setting]** One of the lighthouses from Lake Champlain has been relocated to the museum site. The only other object on the premises that provides any contextual support for the lighthouse is the *Ticonderoga*, a ship located on the lawn across the road. Such eclectic combinations of objects can be found throughout the museum, as houses are located next to churches and workshops from various time periods. Specific goals for the presentation and interpretation of these objects can be used by the institution to create a more enlightening experience for visitors. Larger concepts that connect various locations throughout the site have the potential to not only educate, but provide the audience with a greater appreciation for the institution overall. The use of intentional goal-setting for museums as organizations, has the power to transform their public image and effectiveness in gaining potential audience members.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992), 130-133.

**[Slide 34- Mission vs. New Audience]** In terms of capturing the attention of an audience, Winterthur has successfully achieved international acclaim for its collection and display of decorative arts. However, in addition to the collectors and dealers who regularly visit, the institution has created a recent policy to cater to families with small children. Although from the perspective of a visitor to the decorative arts collections, this makes almost no sense, Winterthur has gone to an impressive amount of work to succeed in this venture. This is the reason the Winterthur Estate came to have a children's garden. **[Slide 35- In the Shadow of the Museum]** From the viewpoint of the institution's mission, I definitely question the garden's existence. But, from a larger perspective of the overall gardens throughout the property, and the institution's attempts at growing its audience, the children's garden and the structures in it are a fun and whimsical addition. In the shadow of the museum, such an escape from the exhibits may prove to be the highlight of a young visitor's day.<sup>12</sup>

**[Slide 36- Enlightening the Room]** As a pastkeeper, I am hardly immune to great representations of the past. My life has now become intertwined with the institutions that I have visited and explored. As part of my fellowship, I had the opportunity to write a paper focusing on the impact of sound in the interpretation of history. However, looking back, I realize that in many cases, it is not sound, but life that is lacking. While walking through many museums, I realize that light plays an essential part in overall presentation. It is not as important that it is well lit, but rather that it is realistically lit. The desired lighting of an exhibit can determine the mood and overall interpretation that the visitor experiences. Natural sunlight has a unique ability to make an exhibit more realistic, as it changes throughout the day. Alternative sources of light have the power to change the color and texture of an exhibit or room. One of the workshops at Hancock Shaker Village was specifically oriented in such a way that the mid-afternoon sun

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<sup>12</sup> Falk 135, 136, 141.

provided enough light for the entire section of the building. With an understanding of the effect of light on the room, I was able to come to a greater appreciation for its impact on the people that once worked within the space.

**[Slide 37- The Windows and Their Purpose]** Later on in the summer, the importance of light at museums took on a rather unique form. While we were eating at Mount Vernon, a car hit one of the main towers that carried electricity to the site. This resulted in power failure for everything that was not on backup generators. Beyond the obvious considerations of an emergency plan for the organization, the reaction of the other fellows caught me off guard. I have worked for years in historic house museums, where I was required to work around the movement of the sun all day. Without electricity, the other members of my group realized for the first time the importance of natural lighting and of the location of windows within a building. As the day progressed, each one of us was forced to confront the ever-changing position of the sun and the effect of its shadows throughout the site.<sup>13</sup>

**[Slide 38-One of the pastkeepers...]** Over the years, I have been called many things, but one of the most common is a ghost. In my position as a pastkeeper, this may be one of the highlights of my job. Everyday, I get to work behind the scenes of wonderful institutions with their own stories haunting their every move. While a visitor may see me, they do not know me or my story. After a minute, I am only a memory, a piece of time gone by. The only evidence of my existence is left as a patina on the objects of the museum's collection or in the policy around which the institution is based. For two months, the fellows brought life back to an old house on the street of Deerfield. **[Slide 39-...and just one of the ghosts.]** But now, we are just a mere memory of life behind the plexi-glass partitions. **[Slide 40- The End]**

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<sup>13</sup> Belcher 125, 126.

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