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*Common Ground: Moving Audiences Outside Their Own Experiences*

### **Chesapeake Journey Toward Each Other**

On the face of it, contemporary Americans appear to be engaged with their country's history to an extent rarely before experienced. Popular history is everywhere – in summer blockbusters, stylishly produced documentaries, and a bewildering array of Internet sites devoted to everything from the history of the roller coaster to an alleged affair between Abraham Lincoln and a member of the Hapsburg royal family. Readers devour books by authors such as Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough, and large crowds wait for hours in the summer sun for a glimpse of the Liberty Bell or a few minutes inside Washington's Mount Vernon home.

But when one begins to analyze this seemingly overwhelming fascination with the past, a different picture emerges. Many people care primarily – or only – about the historical experiences of those similar to themselves. Veterans focus on military history to the exclusion of other stories, unaccompanied men rarely attend women's history programs, and many whites never consider visiting a black history museum. Seven years ago, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's groundbreaking survey of popular attitudes toward the past, *The Presence of the Past*, vividly documented the extent to which the vast majority of Americans consider themselves primarily interested in the histories of their own families.<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of*

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

*American Community*, published the same year as Rosenzweig and Thelen's survey, warned that the family's enshrinement as society's preeminent associational unit – for many individuals, the only larger body to which they consider themselves fundamentally linked – has splintered bonds of social connectedness essential to the survival of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

In this atmosphere of atomized identity, public historians bear a powerful responsibility to expand the scope of their audiences' historical interests in ways that create deeper empathy among different people and strengthen the civic bonds that hold society together. We must create representations of the past that encourage our visitors, readers, students, etc. to envision membership in broader communities and care deeply about the experiences of people who upon first glance appear to have little in common with themselves. We must find ways to present “public histories of union” that reveal the larger forces operating upon all Americans, and the shared societal and environmental frameworks that define our personal histories.

This is not to suggest that we embrace meaningless generalizations. Narratives that make unity incumbent upon simplified, sanitized, feel-good stories forge no bonds of real substance. But programs that engage the past in all its messy contradiction tap into history's power to enrich our civic community. In July 2007, the C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College, a small liberal arts college on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, undertook an ambitious attempt to do just that through a program called “A Chesapeake Journey: From Slavery to Freedom.”

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Our claim to fame at Washington College, which we repeat ad nauseum to anyone who will listen, is that we're the first college in the new nation, chartered in 1782 while Washington's army was still camped in the field. As our name might suggest, we have a special connection to the General, as he is still affectionately known around campus. He lent us his name, gave us one of our first donations, and served as a member of the college's original Board of Visitors and Governors. This relationship with Washington gave rise to the college's participation in a four-year Teaching American History grant entitled Washington's Legacy, which laid the foundation for Chesapeake Journey. Through Saturday Seminars, summer institutes, and a graduate course, Washington's Legacy focused on the road to revolution and the early years of the American republic.

As the program drew near its end, the Starr Center saw an opportunity to turn a theme not fully explored – Washington as a slaveowner – into a program that would get participants out into the fields, harbors, and homes of the region around them and make the study of slavery and resistance an emotional experience as well as an intellectual one. The idea that we learn as much about history through exploration in the world as through exploration in the archives is central to everything we do at the Starr Center. We're a co-curricular center devoted to pioneering innovative approaches to the study of the American experience, exposing our students to history outside the classroom, and highlighting the links between past and present for broad audiences.

With eight middle and high school teachers from public and private schools across Maryland's Eastern Shore, and four Washington College students studying history and education, we embarked on a seven day journey around the Chesapeake Bay. The bay region – from the sandy banks of the Eastern Shore to the 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement at

St. Mary's City – is an unparalleled classroom for studying the history of American slavery, abolition, and emancipation. The first enslaved Africans to set foot in the mainland British colonies arrived on the shores of the Chesapeake in 1619. The region birthed the mainland's first plantation economy, and nurtured a spirit of rebellion that, in the course of cutting ties with England, severely challenged the continued viability of the slave system. The American Revolution unsettled slavery enough to give rise to a substantial free black population perpetually vulnerable to re-enslavement, but also remarkably well-positioned to subvert the institution through aiding runaways and challenging the equation of color and servitude.

Many of the national leaders who defined the terms of debate over black entitlement to the rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” called the Chesapeake home. As we traveled, our path frequently intersected with the journeys of two men who walked these roads before us, whose lives embodied the complexities of the region. Despite constructing his antislavery credentials upon a stinging indictment of his native state as a den of corruption and cruelty, Frederick Douglass retained a deep affection for the land of his birth, noting in 1877 that, “I am an Eastern Shoreman with all that name implies...I love Maryland and the Eastern Shore.” Unlike Douglass, George Washington was born to privilege, predisposed by situation to accept – if not embrace – the institution of slavery. But over the course of his life, Washington became an early dissenter from the region's racial codes, denouncing the common practice of using bondsmen as portable property (an eighteenth century version of an investment portfolio), and ultimately emancipating all of his slaves, the only Founding Father to do so. From

Williamsburg to Washington, D.C., we followed this unlikely pair, immersing ourselves in their words, their experiences, and the landscapes that shaped their lives.

Our group was a diverse one: experienced and novice teachers – the majority in history and social studies; blacks and whites, native Shoreman and Shorewomen, transplanted Yankees, southerners and Pacific Northwesterners. We even had a Dutchman! It's not at all surprising that each of us brought different assumptions and patterns of identification to our journey, different lenses for reading the past, and different hopes for the experience.

From our first morning together, we tried to be open with each other about these differences, as well as about our own emotional reactions to the subject we were gathered to pursue. Several of our white teachers spoke candidly about the awkwardness they so often feel discussing African American history in the classroom, and the sense of unease that accompanies teaching topics of a racially sensitive nature. One, the descendant of an old Eastern Shore family, admitted to being almost afraid to know what his ancestors' relationship with their African American neighbors had been – what role his family had played in creating the Shore's racial climate. One of the Washington College students, about to enter the classroom as a student teacher in the fall, confessed to having virtually no idea, despite her education classes, of how to approach teaching slavery.

One of the black participants had an admission of her own – that she knew little about African American history and felt ill-prepared to pass on anything of significance to her students. Another spoke of a family history – growing up black in lily-white small-town Pennsylvania with older siblings who actively participated in the civil rights movement – that predisposed him to ask hard questions about both the past and present.

A teacher from Dorchester County – Harriet Tubman’s home territory – spoke of two sides to the same coin: the opportunity and challenge of teaching Tubman’s story to a roomful of students who bear the same last names as its protagonists, white and black alike. By acknowledging these things upfront, we quickly dispensed with the pretense that we were, so to speak, “disembodied heads,” approaching the topic from a purely intellectual angle, devoid of any personal backgrounds, hopes, needs, or areas of discomfort. It set a tone of openness for the week, making it safe to speak in emotional as well as intellectual terms and laying the groundwork for trusting each other enough to express our honest reactions to difficult and/or awkward materials or experiences – and to a certain extent, even respectfully let each other know if we unconsciously said something thoughtless or potentially offensive.

One of the most memorable moments of the trip for me came when one of the black teachers pointed out that in describing two fugitive slaves, I had unquestioningly echoed the language used by contemporaries describing the girls as “very beautiful” – in other words, Caucasian in appearance – rather than question why white physiology should be used as a standard. It wasn’t a new idea to me – but it was to some of the participants – and it was a wonderful reminder for me of the importance of “eternal vigilance” in interrogating period language. All in all, it was a very teachable moment for all of us.

Eight months after returning to our air conditioned 21<sup>st</sup> century lives (the Chesapeake is a very hot and steamy place in mid-July), I went back to some of our participants to ask a few questions. How had the trip changed their teaching? Had it changed them personally – affected them emotionally, psychologically, intellectually?

Did they feel a greater capacity for empathy? Did they think about slavery and resistance differently? The answers were challenging – frequently encouraging, but at other times not exactly what I’d hoped to hear. “The primary sources were fantastic,” I heard again and again. “They gave me something concrete to take back into the classroom.” One participant remarked that in a No Child Left Behind world, primary documents – particularly hand-written ones – could partially substitute for field trips and object study. If he couldn’t take his students out into the places and landscapes of the past, he could at least bring some immediacy in through documents.

In fashioning the program, we worked hard to intertwine two sometimes contradictory impulses – a reach toward universal humanity and a highly personal quest for emotional immediacy. Public historians know that most people – ourselves included – approach history with hopes of finding an emotional connection to a story, person, or place of the past. We desire so much more than cool knowledge – we want to be touched, stirred, moved on a highly personal level. And frequently, when we experience the serendipity of these moments, they come to us because something resonated with either our personal experience or some facet of our personal identity. We worked hard to create the conditions that give rise to these moments – to find good storytellers, incorporate reflection time, spend as much time as possible outdoors, and deeply connect stories to place.

Yet much as we cultivated the personal, we also strove simultaneously to move our participants outside their own experiences and identities, to strengthen appreciation for others’ realities on the basis of shared humanity alone. We sought to move 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans to feel for 17<sup>th</sup> century immigrants and educated people to place

themselves in the shoes of individuals to whom the written word was a mystery, but who could read circles around us in understanding the various uses of different flora and fauna. We introduced twentysomethings to the experiences of the elderly, and worked to encourage white people to place themselves in the shoes of a stolen African, and African Americans to climb inside the conflicted mind of a slaveowning revolutionary such as George Washington. And participants responded.

Our student teacher, a white woman, observed that the experience encouraged her to expand her ability to empathize beyond simply the African American experience, and make it a central component of her classroom approach. Learning from the practicing teachers, and from the experience of the group itself, the importance of setting the stage by coming clean about one's own bias/experience/point of view, she began to incorporate empathy building activities into a wide variety of lessons. In the course of a westward expansion unit, she had her students journal about their reactions to the Sand Creek Massacre. In her mission statement for teaching, she placed empathy and the goal of "being humane" at the center. And in what she described as the most fulfilling moment of her student teaching experience, she developed a well-received lesson on the 1915 lynching of Jewish factory manager Leo Frank. Concerned that she might be the only Jewish person her rural students had ever encountered, she felt compelled to place them in the footsteps of a man whose world lay outside the perimeters of their own. "I hope to teach that lesson in every class I ever have," she told me later.

One of our black teachers observed that he came away from the experience with greater respect for Washington and a stronger desire to encourage his students to interrogate the economics that trapped blacks and whites alike. Washington had always

been the deadest of dead white men to this particular teacher – a basically irrelevant and totally unsympathetic figure – but an intense day at Mt. Vernon, a session with biographer Henry Wiencek, a journey through his personal letters, and an extended conversation with a first-person Washington interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg altered his opinion. In the place of sheer hypocrisy, he began to see genuine struggle – inconsistency, prejudice, unexpected progressivism, and a willingness to buck family practices and opinions. As Washington became more real, the teacher found himself more empathetic toward that group of people whose power and privilege often makes them manifestly unsympathetic, especially for those of us of leftist sentiments – the elite. Empathy doesn't gloss over inequality or power dynamics – it doesn't excuse anything – but it does take understanding rather than judgment as its point of departure.

One of our white participants found himself more than a little disturbed by an unexpected moment of empathy with the slaveowning class. He's a man who is fully committed to equality, thinks seriously about race relations and enjoys a good rapport with his black students. He'd much rather get inside the head of the man in the quarter than the man on horseback. But during a tour of the mansion at Wye House, the Talbot County plantation Frederick Douglass describes so vividly in his autobiographies, a knotty stick in the umbrella stand gripped him. Everything he'd learned as a teacher about managing people and controlling a group, all those moments where he'd lost his cool or become angry in the face of excuses or disobedience flooded into him. And for a split second he grasped the dynamic that in another place and time – with different assumptions about people and punishment and right and wrong – led owners to pick up sticks and whips. The experience unnerved him a bit, but ultimately what he felt wasn't

sympathy. He didn't excuse or legitimize the violence that maintained the system, or the people who perpetuated it by writing it off as "things were different back then." But he did grasp something in a gut level, albeit fleeing way. He experienced a moment of empathy for someone he didn't find sympathetic. And it broadened him, both as a teacher and as a person.

How did we create these moments of resonance? I think the most important answer is that we consciously tried to. Not to spark the moments themselves, for that's beyond our power as public historians, but to create the conditions in which such flashes of connection and/or insight are more likely to occur. We sought out speakers like Colonial Williamsburg's Rex Ellis who have a reputation for engaging their listeners' emotions. We arranged the reading list to challenge some prevailing conceptions – case in point Henry Wiencek's *An Imperfect God*, which challenges alike both the idea that there could be such a thing as a "good owner" or a "better" experience under slavery, and the assumption that Washington is just one more in a long line of hypocritical Founding Fathers.

We made it our goal to visit as many "unknown" or "non-museum" sites as possible – Douglass's unmarked birthplace at an isolated country crossroads, Wye House, still the residence of the 11<sup>th</sup> generation of the family who settled it in the 1660's, and the controversial Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Park, among others. While making use of many of the excellent museum education programs out there, we also strove to introduce people to landscapes that retain their historic character without the high level of mediation that so often characterizes museum space. We sought out spaces where contemporary life continues – where the past does not feel divorced from

the present. The 1619 landing site at Point Comfort today lies within the boundaries of the U.S. Army base at Fort Monroe. Our experience there, as well as our sojourn to Douglass's birthplace, brought up emotion-laden discussions about preservation and access in addition to content. We incorporated as many voices – and as many perspectives – as possible into the program, and took every opportunity presented to shine a light upon the places they intersected and the commonalities they shared. We built reflection time into the day's schedule, providing participants the opportunity to experience moments like standing alone on the bluffs of St. Mary's City, watching the sun set over the river that brought the first immigrants to Lord Baltimore's capital.

Ultimately, we attempted to stress – through the sites we visited, the people we explored, and the readings we shared – the point that stories of slavery and resistance are not solely African American ones. They are the building blocks of American history – complete with heroes, villains, and a lot of very ordinary people making choices and compromises, some contradictory in nature, based upon the specific situations in which they found themselves. In other words, people who, regardless of our skin color, are much like ourselves. Previous generations whose decisions and experiences touch our own.

One participant commented that the focus on Washington's struggle gave him a model to use to stress this point in his own classroom. Another found the regional framework particularly helpful, seeing geographical boundaries as a useful way to highlight the interweaving of different stories. Within the framework of "the creation of the Chesapeake," she hypothesized, students would more easily recognize the cords binding different groups together. One black teacher observed that learning more about

the non-African Americans who walked alongside fugitives in the quest for freedom left her more optimistic about human beings' ability to rise above self-interest. Post-Chesapeake Journey, the student teacher found her supervising teacher's practice of presenting African American history as a thematic unit constricting, observing that she planned, in her own classroom, to teach the American survey in chronological format, thus allowing herself greater freedom to demonstrate cause and effect, action and reaction.

Looking back on Chesapeake Journey, I think it's accurate to say that the program exerted significance influence on participants. Each person I talked with said, "I want to do something like this again soon." Without fail, they all commented that the knowledge they had gained about slavery and resistance had made them more comfortable in the classroom, increased their awareness of the most sensitive areas, and eased their fears of unconsciously saying something offensive. For most teachers, there's a simple equation between greater knowledge and a higher comfort level. The program certainly fulfilled its most fundamental goal.

But did we succeed in creating a public history of union? To a certain extent, yes. We did broaden participants' associational boundaries – their tendency to philosophically, intellectually or emotionally link themselves with the historical experiences of others. We broke down some of the artificial barriers that have kept certain stories and protagonists separate. We built empathy for previously unknown or seemingly unsympathetic residents of that most foreign of countries, the past. But we didn't provide a guaranteed panacea for the difficulties of teaching painful history. When one white teacher told me that he'd always approached American history as a unified

story – one that took its direction from the interactions between different individuals and groups – but that it didn’t make it any easier to teach his students about slavery, I had no easy answers.

Teaching in a diverse school system with a difficult racial past, he worked with “mixed audiences” every day. Despite attempting to teach his U.S. survey course from the framework of the Columbian exchange – the idea that the nation emerged from the crucible of native/European/African interaction – he soon found that some of his African American students were genuinely disturbed by the content of his classes. Raised on what he termed “benign black history month stories,” they looked to history for inspiration and self-worth. His accounts of power struggles, exploitation, and abuse left them angry, embarrassed, and searching for something in which to take pride. That is precisely why our program focused on slavery and resistance rather than slavery alone. American slavery gave us some of this nation’s most tragic moments. But the crusade to resist, and ultimately, eradicate it, also provided us some of our most shining examples of courage and humanity. Men and women from diverse racial and regional backgrounds both suffered and triumphed. Their stories instruct and challenge us all, reminding us that, in the words of that classic public history text, *Presenting the Past*, “the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions that delimit contemporary life are not timeless but rather the products of human agency and historical choices.”<sup>3</sup> Human agency and historical choices. That’s what we need to teach.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, Introduction to *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. xxiii.

