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Lost in the Fun House: A Commentary on Anthropologists' First Contact with History Museums

Cary Carson

Times are tough for anthropologists. It was bad enough to get kicked out of the Third World by the folks who had once been the subjects of their fieldwork. Then word got back that they had been playing unwitting accomplices to the imperialist pooh-bahs by providing them with the language and stereotypes to justify their continued control. So home the anthropologists came, dragging their tails behind them. "To escape the entanglements of our colonialist heritage," Eric Gable and Richard Handler recently explained, "many of us have turned our analytical skills on colonialism itself, and on colonial representations, rather than on colonized subjects." The American history museum, they discovered, "is an excellent venue for this sort of analysis."

But not one without new dangers for unwary researchers. Last year Gable and Handler published in *Museum Anthropology* a hair-raising account of misadventures that befell them closer to home. The article deserves notice here for the perspective it brings to their contribution to this journal. "Despite the image of open access which museum rhetoric cultivates, we quickly learned that these institutions could be as autocratically closed as any Albania." Doors slammed in their faces. Directors ignored their calls. "Annoyed and bewildered by these refusals," and believing "we had, perhaps, been beguiled by the discourse of openness," they hit rock bottom. Finally pulling themselves together, they decided their disappointments might have a silver lining after all. Maybe "we should have been grateful" to the uncooperative museums "for revealing to us something of the institutional politics underpinning the exhibits and representations that are the museum's public face."

With this new grip on reality, they made application to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Dennis O'Toole, then the chief education officer, and I persuaded the organization to give them a break. This time, though, Gable and Handler were determined not to be snookered by anybody. They would keep their eyes open and

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their mouths shut. We were “grateful to our patrons,” they recalled later, “but also curious about their agenda. What was in it for them?” They pondered deeply on this matter (“we spent hours speculating on their professional motives”). Eventually they “concocted a Trojan Horse theory.” They decided that O’Toole and I must be plotting to use them as “ostensibly unbiased experts whose academic authority would lend weight to insider intellectuals’ developing critique of institutional inertia.” At first they kept their suspicions a secret. But, as time went by and they found they shared “an intellectual outlook and values” with their patrons, they gradually let down their guard. “Like anthropologists drinking gin and tonics on the colonial officer’s veranda, when we went to dinner with the historians, we had conversations with them rather than interviews. . . . We rarely subjected them to quite the same anthropological technology that we turned, microphone in hand, on both the front-line workforce and the business-side managers.”

Fraternizing with the natives is the first no-no of anthropological fieldwork. Their chumminess was not lost on an Associated Press reporter. He wrote the article entitled “U. Va. Scientists Examine Quirky Williamsburg Tours” that Gable and Handler quote in their essay in this journal, the one that ended with my analogy between the transmission of information in museums and a parlor game.  

The newspaper story hit the two anthropologists like a bombshell. Once again they were astonished by the reaction, as they confess at length in the pages of Museum Anthropology. Oy-oy-oy! things were getting confusing again! “Our friends on the front line were angered by this article.” They “felt we had betrayed their trust. We, in turn, felt we had betrayed our informants.” Not only had they trivialized the interpreters’ work as “quirky” and “quaint,” but, they concede, “our critical appraisal of the institutional representation of history had all too easily been incorporated into a vice-president’s mildly paternalistic critique of the inevitable ineptitude of the corporation’s front-line employees.” The anthropologists’ “innocently offered critique” had become “ammunition in a . . . war of cultural representations, as the Young Turks struggled to make a Republican Disneyland into a democratic dismal-land.” Stricken with “pained reflexivity,” they realized too late, “as any anthropologist working today should have known, that an interpretation of the symbolism of power is also an enactment of power.” From inside the Trojan horse, they had “lost sight of the simple fact that . . . ultimately, neither conservatives nor liberals among the corporate vice presidents were interested in challenging existing lines of authority in the museum hierarchy.” It was another humiliating demonstration of the oldest lesson in anthropology. “Here, in short,” they saw at last, here at Colonial Williamsburg, “we have a colonial situation, a colonial mentality, re-created in museum practice.”

Readers of the Journal of American History will be glad to hear that this time Gable and Handler are pretty sure they have finally got it straight.

3 Ibid., 27-28.
5 Gable and Handler, “Colonialist Anthropology at Colonial Williamsburg,” 30.
I open my commentary on "The Authority of Documents at Some American History Museums" with this summary of the authors' true confessions from *Museum Anthropology*, because there they reveal their own prior assumptions and research strategies more clearly than they disclose them here. Like me, Gable and Handler are dedicated constructionists. They believe, as I do, that scholars' basic social and political orientations influence their choice of research topics and shape the historical conclusions they reach, however carefully they respect historical evidence and follow historical method. By happenstance, their own extraordinary autobiographical revelations give *us* an unexpected glimpse of the world view they brought to the construction of *their* work.

That view would scarcely deserve discussion in these pages if it were theirs alone. It isn't. Gable's and Handler's assumptions about Colonial Williamsburg and other large history museums are consistent with a mythology widely held by university academics, untold numbers of the general public, and even some conspiracy theorists employed by museums themselves. In my opinion, these views are becoming increasingly anachronistic. They are part of a museum folklore that has less and less to do with present realities. Were Gable and Handler to set the agenda for this round-table discussion, I would be left to correct their mistakes and counter their misrepresentations with my own interpretation of the episodes they have chosen to describe. Readers would simply have to guess which one of us had come closer to the truth. Meanwhile, we would all miss a more interesting opportunity, the chance to debate the anthropologists' characterization of Colonial Williamsburg as a "bureaucratic museum" and examine their fundamental premise that interpreters employed by this and similar institutions are expected only to "enliven and embody meanings already established by their superiors." As the piece in *Museum Anthropology* suggests, these conclusions may owe more to the authors' ideology than to their research.

The research itself— their fieldwork— has proved to be as significant and instructive as O'Toole and I hoped it would be when we invited Eric and Richard to make Colonial Williamsburg their first major case study. Those of us they now describe as "the insider intellectuals" are much amused to learn that they gave us such high marks for political savvy and tactical maneuvering. I am almost ashamed to admit that O'Toole and I had nothing more ingenious in mind than letting them use Colonial Williamsburg as a test site for their "anthropological approach to history museums." They told us they wanted to investigate "the way museums self-consciously construct history." They were eager to probe the "deeper cultural values inherent in the museum itself and its functioning as a public institution in a democratic society." Those sounded like interesting questions to us, too. So we said, sure, why not?  


7 Richard Handler and Eric Gable, "The Historic House and the Reconstructed Village: An Ethnographic Study
In recommending the project to Colonial Williamsburg's president, O'Toole explained that "Handler is a serious scholar, not a journalist or academic celebrity." He predicted that "we will find his work informative and insightful, although some of us will not be comfortable with the way he categorizes and interprets his data." He continued: "Handler sees places like Colonial Williamsburg as being in the business of 'the illusory individualization of experience and their subsequent commoditization.' Got that? This is sophomore level 'cultural hegemony' theory. Fortunately, Handler is too interested in his subject and too empirically minded to let this anemic intellectual framework shackle him."8

Our expectations were not disappointed by the empirical data that Richard, Eric, and their graduate student collaborator Anna Lawson collected. The middle-level insights that the trio drew from their collected fieldwork have also proved extraordinarily valuable. From the start, their research zeroed in on the distinction that many museum people make between "objective fact" and "educated guesswork," or, as some would prefer, between "truth" and "fiction." Some of their earliest interviews and field observations brought to light something significant that all of us who work for Colonial Williamsburg had missed. We have taken great pride recently in our presentation of black history. Fair enough, said Handler, Gable, and Lawson, but were we aware that interpreters' discussions of slaves and whites were couched in fundamentally unequal terms? Black interpreters as well as whites often spoke tentatively about the town's eighteenth-century African-American residents. In contrast, their presentations about Caucasian townspeople were more assertive and assured, even when no more was known about them as individuals than about individual blacks. Slaves' stories were often told in the passive voice and usually collectively. They were acted upon by masters, by whites, or simply by the forces of history, whereas interpreters were more likely to portray white people as actors in their own right.

The anthropologists first brought these findings to our attention in meetings with supervisors and interpreters. They explained that black history, being perceived as less documented, was made to sound "conjectural," while the lives of men and women of European descent were presented as "matters of fact." Even before the anthropologists published this information in an article for the American Ethnologist, copies of the manuscript circulated widely throughout the foundation.9 Black and white interpreters talked about the problem. They experimented with remedies. Today most make an honest attempt to use language that does not make some people's history seem more real than it actually is, or other people's less so.

The whole fact/conjecture issue goes deeper than this one interesting application. The present essay, "The Authority of Documents at Some American History

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Museums,” explores ideas that are sure to help museum historians understand their
own ambivalence about the relative value of factual knowledge and educated guess-
work. Again, the anthropologists have shed light on current practices at Colonial
Williamsburg that need correction and improvement. Clearly, historians and
trainers can do a better job of explaining to interpreters that there are pedagogical
reasons for the selection of the primary sources used in training sessions. Documents
and artifacts do not speak for themselves. They reveal their meaning through the
historians and teachers who select some in preference to others, arrange them in one
order rather than another, and interpret them to mean this, not that. Every inter-
preter needs to understand this creative process, whether or not he or she makes
that idea explicit to visitors. I have no doubt that instructors at Colonial Williams-
burg will lift lessons directly from these pages and incorporate them into future
training sessions.

Still other operationally useful insights may be expected from Messrs. Gable and
Handler in the months and years to come. I note with trepidation a footnote refer-
ence in Museum Anthropology to another blast, soon forthcoming, entitled “Deep
Dirt: Messing up the Past at Colonial Williamsburg.” Whether our archaeologists
or someone else should take cover from this salvo only publication will tell. The
point is this: If these two never wrote another word about Colonial Williamsburg
(dear God, hear our prayer!), we would consider ourselves handsomely repaid for
our cooperation and hospitality. We fully expect that their forthcoming book about
Colonial Williamsburg, for which these articles are only trials, will contain a treasure
trove of reliable and practical information about teaching and learning in our
museum. It will occupy an honored place on the reference shelf for years to come.

This and their other recent articles lead me to believe that Gable and Handler’s
book will be a work of fiction where it presumes to describe the complex process
of planning and delivering educational programs at Colonial Williamsburg. They
characterize the ethnographic communities they have chosen to study as “the
bureaucratized nonprofit corporations that most large museums have become.”
They would have us believe that teaching history to the general public is a “highly
stratified business” in such organizations. From there, it is an easy step to a corollary
proposition. According to them, historical interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg
is dictated from on high by historians with advanced degrees and by upper-level ad-
ministrators. Front-line employees, the grunts, are expected to toe the party line,
nothing more. As the two of them see it, “At a museum such as Colonial Williams-
burg, managing history means ensuring that the stories that have been chosen at
the highest levels of the administrative structure are the stories that reach the
public.”

No one should be surprised that two constructionist anthropologists, anxious to
atone for the sins of colonialism, have found exactly what they came looking for.

11 Gable and Handler, “Authority of Documtns,” 120, 122, 124.
Historic houses and museum villages have taken two or three generations to work out an effective match between their medium and their message. In the mid-1960s, Colonial Williamsburg interpreted architecture, gardens, crafts, and furniture as parts of social history. Visitors experienced them through craft demonstrations performed by skilled tradesmen and on guided tours led by costumed hostesses. History and heritage, appealing to universal political principles, were viewed as something different, separate, and more significant than daily life.

*Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg.*

We can be disappointed that they forced their evidence to fit the preconceived "sophomore level cultural hegemony theory" they started with in 1989. Their working premise contains several assumptions that I cannot reconcile with my own experience at Colonial Williamsburg or with my acquaintance with other large history museums over the last twenty-four years. I will deal with only two of them: the accusation that big museums deliberately and systematically deny interpreters' First Amendment rights and the charge that museum administrators strictly control the educational planning process to protect their profit margins.

First, museums are not departments of anthropology. Gable and Handler are right about that. Individual museum historians and individual interpreters lack absolute academic freedom to study and teach whatever subjects take their fancy. All of us are part of a team, or, if that sounds too cozy, we are all part of an organization driven by a single, agreed-upon, educational mission. In this respect, museums are like baseball teams or symphony orchestras. Ballplayers are discouraged from making their own rules and oboists from playing the notes assigned to the violins.
Social history scholarship since the late 1960s has laid the groundwork for museum interpretations that join all aspects of eighteenth-century life into a unified history of society. The sights and sounds of the restored town, always popular with visitors, now became essential elements in presenting Colonial Williamsburg’s new central theme, “Becoming Americans.”

*Courtesy Colonial Williamsburg.*

Likewise, museum staff members are subject to certain stated terms of employment. Those requirements include collaboration and teamwork. Museums are no place for prima donnas, including the professorial kind.

Every intellectual enterprise, to be successful, must achieve a coherent wholeness consistent with its medium. A book must add up between two covers. A film or a stage play seeks dramatic unity. A professor’s lectures hang together in relation to the course syllabus. An outdoor history museum achieves intellectual coherence in each visitor’s personal learning experience, whether the visit lasts two hours or two days. At Colonial Williamsburg the visitors’ classroom is a restored town. We are the team teachers in this very unstructured and informal educational setting. As responsible educators, we believe that some things about the eighteenth century are more worth knowing than others. It logically follows, therefore, that our job—
collectively—starts with deciding what the most important messages are and then figuring out how to make them part of every visitor's experience.

To argue, as I have elsewhere, that museums like ours ought to be public meeting places where important unfinished ideas are exchanged in historical perspective does not preclude our making interpretive choices as an institution. Authors of books, filmmakers, and newspaper editorial writers participate in our discursive democracy without presenting all sides of every issue. We too take stands. Our latest educational master plan states them explicitly: "The Williamsburg story—which we call 'Becoming Americans'—tells how diverse peoples, holding conflicting personal ambitions, evolved into a society that valued both liberty and equality, even though their promise remained, and still remains, unfulfilled for many." Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg deliberately explores both the history behind critical challenges that currently divide American society and the historic forces that simultaneously unite it.12

Those statements are provocative in their emphasis on diversity, conflict, the tension between liberty and equality, and our conviction that American history should ultimately be a story about the process of nation making. Visitors may or may not agree with those statements because the issues they raise are very much matters in contention. To present our institutional points of view as cogently as we can, we must already have debated the issues among ourselves. We hammer out our positions in-house in a manner very different from the one that Gable and Handler imply. Then we stick to them until some future time when—again collectively—we will surely reopen the discussion. Once decisions about the curriculum are made, individual historians, curators, interpreters, or vice-presidents are expected to pitch in and do their part, just as baseball players are expected to play baseball or concert musicians to follow the composer's score. Anything less diminishes the coherence of the visitor's experience.

So, what am I saying? Does our planning process reduce interpreters to robots and their skills to rote? Are the anthropologists correct in leading us to believe that once upper-ups make the basic theme choices, "making sense out of historical evidence . . . is no longer the primary task of most museum educators"?13 If not them, who will make sense of the evidence? Do ballplayers have to break the rules of the game to demonstrate their athletic ability? Does a musical score stifle the creative genius of great musicians? No one writes scripts for interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg. Once the agreed-upon overall themes are collectively arrived at and sub-themes assigned to appropriate places of exhibition, individual interpreters or groups of interpreters are encouraged to identify "talking points" around which they can organize their presentations in particular rooms or "stations." After that, as Gable and Handler must have overheard hundreds of times, every interpreter goes

13 Gable and Handler, "Authority of Documents." 120.
"live." Each is free to be as spontaneous, creative, fresh, and original as any imaginative classroom teacher who nevertheless follows a curricular plan. On second thought, a baseball team or a symphony orchestra is a less accurate analogy than a jazz ensemble. Program planning at Colonial Williamsburg provides the fundamental rhythmic and harmonic structure. Beyond that basic chord pattern, all is improvisation. Over the years, not a few interpreters have become their own inspired Charlie Parkers and Dizzy Gillespies.

The centrality of social history to museum curricula provides another guarantee that interpreters' voices will be heard, no matter what. Today, because of the influence of social history, there is a marriage between the medium and the messenger that resists dictates from higher authorities. A sign of history museums' developing maturity, this closer connection between museum collections of everyday artifacts and the interpreters who use them has been a long time in the making.

Outdoor museums come from similar backgrounds. Most were conceived by, and in the image of, a founding father or mother, usually a collector, booster, or patriot. A staff of lieutenants, often amateurs with little or no museum training, carried out the founder's vision. As the years went by, these dedicated enthusiasts were gradually superseded by a new breed of professional curators, preservationists, archaeologists, and museum historians. Inevitably, responsibility for setting goals shifted from the patriarchs to these professionals.

Interpreters are only the latest and last museum careerists. Their metamorphosis from docents into professional educators (more advanced at some institutions than others) has given them claim to a share in the planning process. Social history, the outdoor museum interpreter's métier, came along just in time to validate that claim.

The explanation lies in the visual nature of the museum experience. Visitors learn most easily and best from three-dimensional objects that they see with their own eyes. Listening to guides and reading labels are secondary and supplementary. Museum people make choices about which objects to highlight and how to interpret them. At Colonial Williamsburg, interpretation made primary use of only a fraction of the restored town during its first fifty years. As long as its most important lessons taught "patriotism, high purpose, and [the] unselfish devotion of our forefathers to the common good," the most important classrooms were the legislative chambers in the reconstructed House of Burgesses and the extralegislative Raleigh Tavern, to which rump lawmakers repaired in 1769 and 1774 to plot the boycott of British goods and to debate the gathering crisis with Parliament.14

The Capitol and the Raleigh Tavern consequently figured among the first buildings rebuilt at the direction of Williamsburg's founder and benefactor, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. He went on to restore the rest of the town to "free it entirely from alien or inharmonious surroundings as well as to preserve the beauty and charm of the old buildings and gardens."15 But these pleasant sights served only as a back drop

15 Ibid.
as long as Rockefeller, his son John D. Rockefeller III, and an advisory committee of professional historians, including Samuel Eliot Morison, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Thomas Wertenbaker, believed that Colonial Williamsburg had "a role to play in furthering the cause of freedom." Challenged by "the ideological conflict between a free society and a police state," John III pressured the foundation in the 1940s and 1950s to "participate in the making of today's history—not simply serve as a reminder of the achievements of the past."16

The founders' vision dimmed in the years following the senior Rockefeller's death and his son's resignation from the board. A generation of professional curators, craftsmen, and preservationists who came to the fore in the 1960s lacked the cold warriors' zeal to make the museum a historical think tank. They did move museum education a giant step forward by organizing interpretation around "Six Appeals." Each focused on something visitors came to Williamsburg to see—the buildings, gardens, furnishings, crafts, archaeological excavations, and, of course, early American "history and heritage," recollected most cogently and visibly on tours of the capital city's public buildings. The Six Appeals enlarged the core curriculum, to be sure, but along very academic lines. They divided the visitor's experience of Williamsburg into the separate disciplines represented by the professionals' specialties, namely, architectural history, horticulture, decorative arts, history of technology, archaeology and preservation, and political history. Interpreters became, in effect, little professors. Their lectures and demonstrations made fuller use of certain categories of objects than Williamsburg interpretation had earlier done. But they scarcely helped the public use the restored town to understand the people who made Williamsburg a community in the eighteenth century.

That task awaited the next changing of the guard in the mid-1970s. Since then, new hires to our museum and to others have tended to share an intellectual tradition, learned in graduate school, that draws our different disciplines together. Now curators are likely to be trained in material culture, architectural historians in folklore and the study of vernacular buildings, archaeologists in anthropology, and historians in the new social history. Furthermore, and significantly, career-minded interpreters increasingly share this background. Gable and Handler can take some consolation in the irony that the history museum they have chosen to study has already embraced the mother discipline of anthropology and actively promotes her many and various offspring.

The most important consequence of this shared anthropological outlook has been our commitment to represent the eighteenth-century Williamsburg community from top to bottom. For ten years, scholars, craftsmen, and interpreters have directed their energies toward reconstructing, restoring, refurnishing, and reinterpreting a slave quarter, a mental hospital, a county courthouse, additional workplaces for artisans, and numerous domestic settings appropriate to the activities of

women and children. Plans for a tenement and two more quarters in town are on the drawing board.

These re-created settings have become venues for educational programs that explore the foundation's central theme, "Becoming Americans." It is a story about two transplanted peoples—one African, the other European—who met in a land unfamiliar to both. Over the course of several generations, they developed distinctively different, yet distinctively American, white and black cultures. By reconstructing the dwellings and workplaces of Williamsburg's ordinary inhabitants, by furnishing them with utilitarian, everyday artifacts, and by employing interpreters well versed in social history and material culture, Colonial Williamsburg has made an investment in "total history" that would be extremely hard to reverse however much high-level bureaucrats might someday wish to do so.

That is not to say that a social history museum should therefore cease to evolve. Ours hasn't. The effort to repopulate the town with everyone who played a role in its affairs in the eighteenth century has gradually led to the same fragmentation that plagues social history scholarship generally. Interpreters are prominent among those who complain that the visitor's experience too often lacks "community connectedness." They explain that "almost every site and program is interpreted as if it and its [historical] inhabitants had no connection with any other site or person in town." 17

Here again, the physical integrity of a reconstructed village gives museum historians and interpreters an opportunity to synthesize that writers of specialized monographs and teachers of proseminars lack. Williamsburg in its first life was a fully functioning community, although its population was divided by race, wealth, gender, religion, and all the other differences that brought individuals and groups into frequent conflict. The formal and informal institutions that mediated their common life still line the city streets: churches, courthouses, stores, theaters, bedrooms, and taverns. The challenge for us is to understand how the institutions worked, admittedly to the greater advantage of some residents than others. But work they did. As skilled interpreters of social history and material culture, we should be able to explain how these institutions connected and controlled the lives of the townspeople whom we have now been at such pains to include in the Williamsburg story. Future program development along these lines will only strengthen the contribution that social history makes to outdoor museum education and only confirm that professional interpreters will continue to be its principal public spokesmen.

How open is the deliberative process that leads to the choice of interpretive themes at a large history museum like Colonial Williamsburg? Not open at all, according to Gable and Handler. That is the second allegation I want to challenge.

Anthropologists usually hesitate to assume that a people's social structure is a reliable guide to the way they order routine social transactions. The table of organization at Colonial Williamsburg probably does resemble a corporate hierarchy, at least

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when compared to the much denser layering of chancellors, deans, department chairs, full professors, associates, and assistants that separates the presidents of universities from lowly graduate students. Fifteen years ago there was a fairly clear vertical line of command running through the organization of any large museum. No longer. Professional journals and museum conferences have been preaching decentralized teamwork and project management for a decade or more. Museum administrators have been the preachers. Those at Colonial Williamsburg are no exception. Indeed, our organization is recognized as an industry leader in collaborative program planning. The process can be opened to admit even more sunshine, to be sure, but the notion that upper-echelon administrators are the message makers at Colonial Williamsburg and interpreters merely their mouthpieces is an anthropologists' fairy tale.

Case in point: Rewriting the foundation's master plan. Seventeen years ago, two historians, a teacher, an archivist, an architect, and a curator wrote "Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg," the organization's first-ever formal plan of education. Although it was not produced at corporate headquarters, the authors were nevertheless instructed by Colonial Williamsburg's president to write it in secret without consulting anyone above or below them. Last year, we decided to rewrite the plan. The two projects were as different as night and day. Four authors were assigned to the task this time. They included an interpreter and dramatist, a research historian, and two administrators who are also historians. Their search for organizing themes began with an invitation to all thirty-six hundred employees to read four important new books on early American history and discuss them at a newly organized book club. Fifty or so co-workers participated. The book club discussions brought employees' thoughts together with recent scholarship. Some preliminary themes began to take shape.

The four authors consulted frequently with interpreters, curators, researchers, and others who were simultaneously studying problems concerning the preparation and orientation of visitors, the physical appearance of the restored town, and the organization of the visitors' learning experience. Individuals eager to promote pet projects met with the committee. Committee members in turn frequently discussed their progress at department and division meetings. Another round of eight, all-foundation, employee meetings was held several months after the work began, when the authors had produced a précis of their theme statement. These round-table sessions attracted upwards of 125 interested colleagues. A draft of the new plan appeared after Christmas. Copies were dispatched to the four corners of the education division in the same mailing that distributed them to the president and senior officers. The vice-president for education urged all recipients to "take notes on where you think the content is right as well as [on] what is missing. Let us know if there are topics that have too much or not enough emphasis. Do not hold back!

Send your written comments to Cary Carson." 19 People took him at his word. The draft became a hot topic of conversation in boardrooms and break rooms across the foundation.

Preparation of the new plan, "Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to Be Both Free and Equal," is the latest and best example of a collaborative planning practice that has become a habit over almost ten years. Project management takes many forms at our museum and answers to many different names—design review committees, interpretive planning teams, task forces, and quality circles. All have one thing in common. They bring together knowledgeable people, regardless of rank or position, and give them responsibility and authority for planning our educational programs. Not every team has achieved this ideal, but over time the failures are fewer and the successes more frequent.

Decentralized museum operation is old news everywhere, except to Gable and Handler. Several years ago, for instance, the Henry Ford Museum, like Colonial Williamsburg, adopted a nondepartmental project management system to plan major exhibitions. Last year Spencer Crew, the newly appointed director of the National Museum of American History (NMAH) of the Smithsonian Institution, asked virtually everyone down to the level of service personnel to serve on task forces reviewing the policies and practices that govern that giant museum. These parallel developments at Henry Ford, NMAH, and Colonial Williamsburg can hardly be dismissed as anomalies. These are the three largest, most corporate, most "bureaucratized" history museums in the country.

So where have our anthropologists come up with the idea that "at the top of the administrative hierarchy, executive officers, historians, curators, and, in some cases, trustees deliberately make interpretive choices" at Colonial Williamsburg? 20 Partly from informants who told them the truth. There are indeed working, writing, publishing historians and curators who also hold administrative posts at our museum—eight of them, to be exact: two vice-presidents and six departmental directors. Before now, we supposed that that was a good thing. Who would the anthropologists prefer to place in these positions? More "business types"? Furthermore, we think these senior scholars should have a hand, even a special role, in making the institution’s basic interpretive choices. Their professional training and experience can hardly be said to disqualify them!

As for the others, the nonacademic administrative officers and (Heaven forbid!) the trustees, they characteristically show keen (if not undivided) interest in the organization’s interpretive innovations, and individuals among them have always felt free to express dissenting opinions. But they have never in all my seventeen years with the foundation intervened to abrogate major program initiatives pushed by the staff or to substitute their own interpretive preferences. Not once have I been told to change my tune or downplay this or that kind of history because somebody

19 Steve Elliott to Education Division Management Team, memorandum, Jan. 21, 1994 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archives).

20 Gable and Handler, "Authority of Documents." 120.
upstairs thought it might displease the ticket buyers. That tired old jab lands few solid punches on museums today.

Why then have some of Gable's and Handler's interviewees whispered this nonsense in their ears? Because every large nonprofit organization employs some people who disagree with its mission or are disappointed with their own piece of the pie. “Philistines” and “businessmen” are convenient scapegoats. Other employees raised genuine complaints that call our attention to serious structural problems common to corporate organizations everywhere. Where supervisors supervise supervisees, some will abuse their authority. Where the marketplace determines the value of people's different skills, issues of “comparable worth” will arise. The “suits and skirts” at Colonial Williamsburg should spend more time on the front line; more “rank-and-file” interpreters should participate in book club discussions and learn to do research. Paperwork and committee meetings take time off everybody's clock that they could better spend elsewhere. These are real institutional problems that all of us who work for large museums need to attend to. It hardly helps us understand and address them to insist that Darth Vader made us do it.

Gable and Handler believe otherwise. We should ask why. Why have they seized on authoritarian rule as the key to understanding everything else? Because they hold an unshakable conviction that dialectical materialism is the clockwork that makes all the world go round. Everyone is entitled to her or his culturally constructed Theory of Everything. But in our tradition of scholarly discourse, world views, however grand, are still subject to old-fashioned rules of evidence, tests for accuracy, and rational argument. An uncritical dogmatism that remains muted in these pages, Gable and Handler crow from the rooftops in their companion piece in *Museum Anthropology.*

Their rap sounds like this. Capitalist Williamsburg is a slave to “ticket receipts.” To maximize profits, “administrators believe that teaching history to a mass public [must be] as much concerned with ‘entertainment’ as it is with ‘education.’” One without the other is “unpalatable.” Only “a sanitized version of the nation's past” can be “sold in the cultural marketplace.” Product control therefore requires top-down administrative control. But because the success of the educational product depends on creating the illusion of openness, “the practice of administrative authority” is masked by “the principle of scientific authority.” They tell us *that* in the piece printed here. Captains of industry and a few high-living lackey historians have created a “regime of truth that mystifies itself by making scholarship, not corporate hierarchy, appear as the ultimate authority.” Big Brother Williamsburg cynically foists on a gullible public “the kind of inspirational boosterism that some people . . . believe made our country great.” Meanwhile “the dirty truth of our collective past” gets squashed and swept under the rug.21

Oh my gosh, I feel the ground shifting again! Who is hiding inside that Trojan horse? If it's you, Eric Gable and Richard Handler, please come out. It's OK. Honest! The class war is over. They’ve sounded the all clear. It's not too late to think this whole thing over one more time! C'mon back to Williamsburg! All is forgiven!