

One if by Land! Two if by River? Or, What if Everything You Thought You Knew were Wrong?

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AS HISTORY TEACHERS attempt to bring student thinking processes in line with that of historians, one of the major recommendations that appears in the end notes of nearly every study on the subject, and every set of state curriculum frameworks, is the injunction to partner with historic sites and museums to help students “learn about history.” That recommendation comes with a set of assumptions about historic sites and the authority and authenticity of the stories they present to the public. Sophisticated readers of history know that there are about as many interpretations of historic events and persons as there are authors willing to commit the time and energy to writing about them. However, we often hold no such expectations of our historic sites and the stories they tell. We go to the place to touch history—to stand in the shoes of those who came before us, to see from their vantage point, to breathe the same air, to get *the* story.

But what if the story these sites told were wrong? And what would you do if you could change it?

Welcome to the Old North Church

I was given such an opportunity a few years ago. Not surprisingly, I leapt at it. In 2005, I was hired to develop the education and interpretive programs for the Old North Church in Boston. While taking a job is hardly

cause to put out a press release, my hire had broader and more noteworthy implications than usual. Until 2005, the Old North Church, one of the truly iconic American historic buildings, had never really operated as a historic site,¹ but rather as a historic church that opened its doors to the public. This may come as a surprise if you have ever counted yourself among the 500,000 visitors who come to the Old North annually, but it's true.

When I arrived, the tour, written by parishioners and presented to visitors, was the only bit of interpretation *of* the Old North, generated *by* the Old North, that existed. I was convinced that with a little bit of research, I could enliven that tour and update the decorative arts interpretation of the building to include new stories and more contemporary reflections on what the Old North means within the scope of American history, and then quickly move on to larger projects.

The first step—to begin the research to develop the interpretation of the church—was where the first major problem appeared: In the 284 years since its founding, no one had written a single scholarly account of the Old North. None. Zip. Zilch.

Out of all the publications *about* the Old North, only one was written from *within* the congregation, about the church: Mary Kent Davies Babcock's 1947 vanity press book entitled *Christ Church, Salem Street Boston: The Old North Church of Paul Revere Fame: Historical Sketches*. With prose ranging from Victorian bodice-ripper to triumphalist historical narrative, Mrs. Babcock's book included more romanticized imagery than research. For example, her description of the Salem Street site as the location for building the church reads as follows:

The land covered by Christ Church is therefore, virgin soil, no other work of man's hands has ever stood there, unless it might be some Red Man's wigwam before the White Man drove him away.²

Once in the archive, it became clear why Mrs. Babcock relied more heavily on her imagination than on documentation: In the 284 years of the church's history, no one had cataloged its archive. For the better part of those 284 years, the archive was not even entirely in one location. When the archive was finally consolidated in 2005 at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the first order of business was to catalog these materials and get scholars to review the collection to find out what was in there.

As the cataloging began, I dug through the unmarked boxes to try to determine what stories could emerge and which scholars to engage. It might be helpful to note at this point that I am not a historian; nor am I a researcher. I am an educator. So, while it was amusing to hear the executive director call me the "world's foremost expert" on the content of the Old North's archives, the fact that it was true—I was the only person who

had seen the entire collection in 284 years—filled me with an exhilarating kind of terror. Fortunately, our dedicated and indispensable research team soon rescued me from my own inexperience.³

As we worked our way through the materials, the contradictions and complications inherent in interpreting the Old North quickly emerged. One of the most glaring was the current configuration of the Church's interior. Last renovated in 1912, the current interior layout of the Church is a Colonial Revival restoration. The all-white interior covers the original, more colorfully-ornamented Anglican church, giving the appearance of what people envision as a "typical New England church" with Congregational roots, rather than one of the King's own.

Hardly a benign whitewash, the politics behind the restoration were shot through with all the xenophobia, anti-Catholicism, and nativist tensions coursing through early twentieth-century Boston. Bishop William Lawrence, who oversaw the restoration, dashed my hopes that we might be able to overlook some of those tensions when I read his declared goal for the restoration in a letter he wrote to a fellow Brahmin: "Let us create an Oasis of Old Americanism amidst that Italian population."⁴

Further complicating matters was that we could not speak with any authority on the rumors of enslaved congregants and the "negro pew." We knew that from its inception in 1723, African Americans, both free and enslaved, were members of the congregation. However, the baptism, marriage, and burial lists in the vital records were the only data we had about African American congregants. There is no contextual information that presents the slightest bit of evidence as to how they were treated or viewed, or what roles they may have played in the life of the congregation. When members of the public ask our guides, "Who sat up in the galleries?" they could tell them that slaves sat there, but could offer no context, no understanding, nothing to frame the discussion for either visitors or our guides who must serve on the front lines of this delicate discussion.

And then David McCullough inadvertently burned down the church. On the Freedom Trail in Boston, you are likely to find many individuals, who having done their grown-up summer reading, walk about armed with a copy of McCullough's *1776*. This is a fine, readable narrative history of the events leading up to the Revolution, but where the Old North is concerned, it is just plain wrong. To wit:

With firewood selling for \$20 a cord in Boston, more and more trees were cut down, including the old elm at the corner of Essex and Orange streets, known as the Liberty Tree, which provided fourteen cords. A hundred or more houses were pulled apart. Old barns, old wharves, and derelict ships were chopped up, almost anything that would burn. On orders from General Howe, Old North Church was demolished for firewood.⁵

The fact that there were two buildings called the Old North—the Old North Congregational Meeting House, which was made of wood and no longer exists (because of the events related above), and Christ Church, the *Anglican* Old North Church of Paul Revere fame, made of brick and still standing on Salem Street, where it has since 1723—never made into McCullough’s account. When visitors ask when the church was destroyed and rebuilt, the finer points of that discussion get lost amid the t-shirt stalls and the desire to try real clam *chowdah*.

And then there is Paul Revere. We could spend all day, every day clearing up visitors’ misconceptions about him. But that became part of the problem. If you survey any American history textbook, from any school, at any grade level, you will always find a mention of Paul Revere—usually alongside the Longfellow poem urging readers to “hear of the Midnight ride of Paul Revere.” Unfortunately, rather than an accurate account of the Revolutionary struggle, Longfellow’s poem was an attempt to use the lesson of Paul Revere—that one man can make a difference—to gin up support for the Northern Cause prior to the Civil War. But that 80-year gap between the subject and writer gets lost in the haze of doggerel, and the 30-plus years between visitors’ last middle-school recess and the onset of the middle-aged spread. Visitors then come to the Old North Church with preconceptions about The Story and how it should be told, and in a Disneyfied world expect to hear *that* story, no matter how fuzzy their recollection of it may be. Thus, we have Revere as a colonial Superman—he lit the lanterns, rode the horse, and saved the Revolutionary leaders—before anyone realized that Clark Kent was missing.

’Tis a Conundrum

So, almost everything visitors know about the Old North Church, and much of what we had been telling them, turned out to be wrong, and we appeared to be the only ones who minded. Because of our lack of understanding of our own story, an organic interpretation emerged in which the public has told us what our story *should* be. And for many years, if visitors came to the Old North Church, that simple, uncomplicated story was what they would get. So, suddenly telling a half-million people a year that they were wrong seemed unnecessarily hostile. We had to come up with a better plan.

As we understood it, then, our primary task became: How do we begin to change people’s minds about what it is they think they already know?

This task was further complicated by the unique space that the Old North Church holds in the nation’s collective imagination. Standing at the intersection of history and mythology, we had to ask, what was our

responsibility to both? If we emphasize the mythological aspects of our story, how do we encourage a Judeo-Christian nation to embrace a Greco-Roman conception of gods—with flaws and human characteristics? How do you tell the story of a site that has few agreed-upon facts, no real sense of its own internal history, and a long way to go before you will ever have an “official story”?

We decided to take a step back from the story and to try to get at the root of what it was that we were doing. The prospect of finding the answers to all of those great big interpretive questions was fascinating, but, with every new bit of research uncovered, the story kept shifting. Even more nerve-wracking was thinking that we needed to pin down a story that would satisfy all of the different needs of an audience whose interests ranged from NASCAR to NPR without smacking of partisanship, elitism, or pandering. When I finally admitted that our *story* was our liability, of all of those other important questions, the most important one that emerged was this: *Why were we having so much fun?*

Over the course of many months of research leading up to this, several of our researchers and I worked to try to piece together some of these stories. And when we solved some mystery, uncovered some great document, imagined a new possibility, we laughed at what incredible “geeks” we were to love this process. But this was it! This was the reason—the most fun we had had with history in our lives. *This process* was what we had to provide for our visitors. If we could not build a program that could provide a pat set of answers, we might as well create one that let visitors have fun with the questions.

Tories, Timid, or True Blue?

That program became *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?*,⁶ so named for the John Adams comment that during the Revolution, at any given point, a third of the population were Tories (loyal to the Crown), timid (waiting to see how it all shook out), or “true blue” (Patriots engaged in the Cause). While the content for the program came directly from our archives, the theory behind it was based on Wineburg’s landmark study⁷ identifying the ability to “think historically” as the difference between how historians and students of history typically encounter historical information.

In partnership with the Massachusetts Institute for Technology’s HyperStudio Laboratory for Digital Humanities and Myriad Inc., and with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?* makes use of emerging hypermedia technologies that encourage cross-textual use of primary source documents—methods that have been repeatedly shown to encourage historical thinking⁸—to present students

and visitors with the questions raised by the evidence we have *thus far* about the choices members of the 1775 congregation faced on the eve of Revolution.

The core of the program centers on four families whose circumstances represented some aspect of life in pre-Revolutionary Boston. At the outset of each of the families' stories is a short biographical sketch that presents the particular conundrum each faced. These sketches then lead into a workspace with multiple documents with which users can piece together what they think happened. Further, each biography represents a different aspect of historical study (i.e., historiography, interpreting conflicting sources, negative research—what the absence of information can tell you, etc.), based on the particular challenges presented by the available information and the processes by which the research team uncovered that information.

What We Learned

During the summer of 2008, we tested this program with fifteen intrepid teachers to see not only what they thought of *Tories*, but also what effect it had on their own encounters with the Old North Church. These teachers recorded their thoughts before and after going through the program, via a "think aloud" exercise as they toured the Old South Meeting House in Boston and then the Old North Church. At both sites, they were asked individually to interpret the historic site as a whole, as well as a single museum panel within the site, and then were recorded to see how engaged they were in tours of both sites.

It is difficult to overstate the differences between the two sets of tours. On a variety of measures, after working with *Tories*, the teachers showed a significantly increased likelihood of engaging in historical thinking or problem solving activities.⁹ They spent approximately three times as much time-on-task interpreting a single museum display on the post-test (15:44) as compared to the pre-test (4:08).¹⁰ Instances of the use of the phrase "I wonder" or "I was wondering" jumped from twenty occurrences on the pre-test to sixty-seven on the post-*Tories* tests,¹¹ indicating, minimally, an increase in curiosity about the Old North and its history. They repeatedly asked questions well beyond *Tories* content about the Old North, Revolutionary-era Boston, historical interpretation, the validity of sources, and the assumed authority of this historic site on the subject of the American Revolution; these questions were clearly stimulated by the open-endedness of the project.

The lesson plans the teachers created to indicate how they might use the historic sites in their classrooms also displayed stark differences. In

the pre-test, only three of the fourteen lesson plans¹² indicated any use of primary sources in their lessons. Most lessons revolved around vague information gathering or “scavenger hunt” activities; the most frequent direction for students was to “explore” or “find three” objects, people, or events that they found interesting in some way. Only one indicated any type of lesson with activities that could be construed as encouraging historical thinking. By contrast, thirteen out of fourteen lesson plans¹³ in the post-*Tories* test indicated use of primary sources in activities that would engender historical thinking. Ten specifically indicated using *Tories* as a model for incorporating historical thinking in their classrooms.

Beyond the differences in how the teachers approached the buildings, survey data about their assessment of *Tories* indicated that among the overarching take-away lessons were the “difficulty in getting the facts straight” in historical interpretation, as well as “the role of historians in shaping the historical narrative.”¹⁴

To support the investigative model used in *Tories*, the tour guides were instructed to discuss the unknown elements of the Old North’s story and the fact of ongoing research. Further, when no definitive answer to a question was available, they were to tell the teachers that they did not know and present them with the possibilities currently being researched. Rather than being frustrated by this tack, the teachers found it fascinating.

The following exchange took place during one of the post-*Tories* tours of the Old North when the guide described an anomaly in the crypt of the church. When one teacher asked why the structure was built in this particular configuration, the guide responded that she did not know. The teacher then went on to say:

It’s very interesting coming here, because [in] most of the museums and historic sites you go to, it’s very definitive—“This is what happened”—and it’s very interesting coming to a place where it’s not definitive, it’s kind of an ongoing process, because you have a “maybe this” or “maybe that”; it just questions the validity of other places that you go to that say, “This is the way it is”—I mean, where’d you come up with that?

While it is clear that we do not have all the answers, to either the historical questions or the pedagogical ones, *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?* represents a step forward in helping not just the Old North, but historic sites beyond, provide students and visitors with a method for challenging assumptions and countering apocryphal, or anachronistic misunderstandings of the history presented. By initiating visitors into the processes by which new information is uncovered, *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?* provides a foundation on which historic sites may encourage a more sophisticated reading and a true investigation of the historical record found at these sites.

So what do you do when everything you think you know is wrong? Tell people that you do not know all the answers, but are working on it. Tell them that history is as much about asking the questions as it is about finding the answers. And invite them to join in the process of figuring it all out.

Notes

1. Established in 1992 as a secular 501(c)(3) organization, the Old North Foundation was created to separate the pastoral functions of the Old North as an active Episcopal church from the tourism and educational functions of the Old North as a historic site. The first executive director was hired in 2004. As principal of Baron Consulting, I was hired to begin the process of developing an interpretive/educational plan. In 2007, Elisabeth Nevins became the first full-time Director of Education and Interpretation. I continue to work with the Foundation to develop the *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?* program.
2. Mary Kent Davies Babcock, *Christ Church, Salem Street, Boston: The Old North Church of Paul Revere Fame, Historical Sketches, Colonial Period 1723-1775* (Boston, MA: Thomas Todd Company, 1947).
3. The members of the research team were: Michaela Thompson, biographical researcher; D. Joshua Taylor and Rhonda McClure, genealogists, New England Historic Genealogical Society; Dr. Chernoh M. Sesay, African American scholar, DePaul University; Jane Lyden Rousseau, osteoarcheologist/crypt research.
4. W. Lawrence, "Letter to Mr. Kellen," Bar Harbor, ME: Christ Church in the City of Boston Archive, 11 July 1912.
5. David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).
6. The working prototype of *Tories, Timid, or True Blue?* can be found on the Old North's website at <<http://www.oldnorth.com/schoolprograms/tories/index.htm>>.
7. Samuel S. Wineburg, "Historical Problem-Solving—A Study of the Cognitive-Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83, no. 1 (March 1991): 73-87.
8. Cynthia Hynd-Shanahan, Jodi Patrick Holschuh, and Betty P. Hubbard, "Thinking Like a Historian: College Students' Reading of Multiple Historical Documents," *Journal of Literacy Research* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 141-176; Bill Tally and Lauren B. Goldenberg, "Fostering Historical Thinking with Digitized Primary Sources," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 1-21; Jeffrey D. Nokes, Janice A. Dole, and Douglas J. Hacker, "Teaching High School Students to Use Heuristics While Reading Historical Texts," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99, no. 3 (August 2007): 492-504; Bruce A. VanSledright and Christine Kelly, "Reading American History: The Influence of Using Multiple Sources on Six Fifth Graders," *Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 3 (January 1998): 239-265.
9. Prior to testing participants' interpretations of the two historic sites, pilot studies were conducted using Wineburg's heuristics for historical thinking at the sites. Following this testing, it became clear that the framework, devised using multiple documents and photographs, was not directly transferable for use in assessing historical thinking when

using historic buildings. Subsequently, I replicated Wineburg's study using only the Old North Church as the primary "document" for historians to evaluate. From this study, I developed a revised framework for evaluating historical thinking for use with historic buildings (In press). Thus, the categories against which participants' historical thinking were measured were: Origination (How did this building come to be in this place?); Intertextuality (comparison of specific building/architectural features or building function with similar buildings); Contextualization (evaluating the multiple strata of history within a single building); Suppositions (controlled imaginative leaps used to make sense of discordant elements within the visual record); Empathetic Insights (highly contextualized attempts to understand the motives of historical agents related to the building). Using discourse analysis of participants' tours coded against the above-mentioned framework, the differences in pre/post testing were: total number of utterances increased from 1,935 to 2,447 (26%); The total number of historical thinking utterances rose from 404 (20.8 %) to 886 (36.1%), indicating a 72.5% increase in the total number of historical thinking utterances. For complete study results, please see Christine Baron, "Encouraging Historical Thinking at Historic Sites" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2010).

10. Though participants were given only fifteen minutes to tour both historic sites, they were given no specific time restrictions or recommendations when viewing the museum displays.

11. Numerical instances of the use of the word "wonder" or "wondering" were 25 to 85 on the pre-test/post-test tours and analysis of museum panels, respectively. When navigational or logistical statements such as, "I wonder where those stairs go?" or, "I wonder how much longer we have?" were removed and only statements indicating "wonderment" related to the content or material culture of the building were retained (e.g., "And I'm wondering how it was that Paul Revere seemed to get the credit? And, how arbitrary that was and the fact that it's engraved in there now makes it so"), the pre-test/post-test numbers are 20 to 67, respectively.

12. Of the fifteen teachers who participated in the study, one did not turn in lesson plans, thus the variance.

13. The one lesson plan that did not specifically mention the use of primary sources actually constructed a very elaborate set of lessons using the change-ringing peal of bells at the Old North, tying their use into the larger theme of differences in communication capabilities across time. Rather than mentioning the use of primary sources, the lesson plans indicated a strong connection to the use of their physical environs of Old North Church.

14. Out of fifteen respondents, the following categories had the highest percentages of responses indicating "very effective" or "most effective": 100%, how different people can view the same events differently; 93.4%, difficulty in getting the facts straight in historical interpretation; 93.3%, the need to corroborate differing documentary accounts; 86.6%, the role of historians in shaping the historical narrative; 86.6%, understanding historical information about Revolutionary-era Boston; 73.4%, understanding historical information about the Old North Church. The lowest score, 33.4%, was in response to "what the absence of information can tell you about someone or something."



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