

Museum Overview

“Tell us your story”

So states the sign on the front door of the Cape Fear Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina. We later found out that this was left over from a previous exhibit, but it is a welcoming and appropriate phrase for the entry of a Museum whose mission is to tell the stories of the Lower Cape Fear. From the first moment one gets a sense that you, as a member of the Museum community, are important. The New Hanover County, under whose governance the Museum falls, feels the Museum adds significantly to the cultural legacy, is good for tourism, and that it is important for the local community to have a place to represent their heritage.

Logistics

We visited the Cape Fear Museum (<http://www.co.new-hanover.nc.us/cfm>) in mid-October 2002. The Museum is located at 814 Market Street in the historic district of downtown Wilmington, North Carolina. It is open Tuesday through Saturday 9am to 5pm and Sunday 1pm to 5pm. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, they are open Mondays 9am to 5pm. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors and students, and \$1 for children, with discounts for groups of twelve or more. The first Sunday of the month is free to New Hanover County residents.

The Museum administration, led by Director Ruth Haas, is broken into six departments: Exhibits, Education, Collections, Associates Staff, Administrative and Public Relations. There are approximately 40,000 objects in the total collection with

about 25% on display at any given time. The Museum is staffed by 20 employees and over 160 volunteers. Approximately 30,000 visitors come to the Cape Fear annually.

The Cape Fear Museum and the Wilmington Public Library, although both county-funded, are not mandated as part of the County budget. If the money isn't available, the County does not have to fund either of these institutions. Due to this potential financial peril, the Cape Fear Museum is working towards revenue generation through the hiring of a Development Director, soliciting private donations for short term exhibitions and special events and corporate sponsorship.

Profile

Museums fill many functions for different regions, although most have a guiding mission or reason for collecting the objects that they do, as well as presenting these collections with intent to educate. The Cape Fear Museum is no exception to this rule, and is in an exciting redefinition period for its mission and future exhibits. We profiled this museum and analyzed its effectiveness in three major areas:

- Response to community
- Education principles
- Usefulness of its collection in answering the mission

Our impression of the Museum was somewhat incomplete, as we arrived on a sunny Friday afternoon when visitors were scarce, and no school groups were touring. We evaluated the permanent exhibits: *Waves and Currents* which displays a regional history; the *Michael Jordan Discovery Gallery* explaining the local natural history for children; *From Williston to the World* chronicling the lives of local African-Americans that have risen to prominence after graduating from Williston High School; and the Giant

Sloth replica skeleton found near Wilmington approximately 1.5 million years ago. Additional collections include display cases of Bride Dolls and two small cases of changing exhibits in the entry.

While at the Museum, we were able to arrange an interview with the Museum Curator, Barbara Rowe and the Museum Historian, Eve Carr. Barbara joined the staff in 1986 after four years at the Milwaukee Public Museum (www.mpm.edu) working in American Costumes and Textiles. Eve arrived at the Cape Fear Museum in July 2002. We were interested in Eve's newcomer perspective in comparison to Barbara's eighteen years of experience. Additional activities included attending the Director's lecture on the temporary flag exhibit, a glimpse into the Museum's storage, and discussion with staff on methods of collecting and displaying artifacts from the region.

History

The Cape Fear Museum has had many incarnations that affect its collections and relationship with the community. It was begun in 1898 by the Daughters of the Confederacy to collect historical items commemorating the Civil War fighters of the Wilmington area. This collection was housed in the Wilmington Light Infantry Armory, and then relocated for safety concerns during World War I to Raleigh where the Cape Fear collection became mixed with that of the Museum of History. Some items were never returned to Cape Fear and remain in the Museum of History's storage facilities.

After the War, most of the collection was moved back to Cape Fear. The Museum was renamed the New Hanover County Museum and began collecting with a global focus. In 1977, the Museum's mission was returned to collecting only Lower

Cape Fear historical items, and was taken over by the New Hanover County government. The mission statement was last modified in 1995, and a year and a half ago the Museum obtained a new director who has been making great changes.

Many items in the collection needed to be re-examined due to the period of time from the 1920's to 1977 when collecting was not done to match a mission. For the past year and a half, an inventory has been taking place, entirely staffed by volunteers, that deaccessions material not pertaining to Lower Cape Fear history, and is bringing the collection into focus while simultaneously cataloging the items that will be kept. Many of the items, especially photographs, do not have any identifying data to accompany the object. A recent on-going project is to identify people in photographs as well as to find who owned different items and how they were used, so that the items can be used appropriately in future exhibits.

Mission

“To make available to the public the history, natural history and culture of the Lower Cape Fear area through interpretive exhibits and educational programs.”

- The Cape Fear Museum Statement of Purpose adopted in 1977

The current mission emphasizes local culture and history, and Museum staff tries to tie all items and exhibits back to the community members who can relate to that history, while providing a basis for tourists who visit Wilmington to understand the history of the area and connect with the community through a perspective otherwise absent from a map or guidebook. The County supports this mission with its funds, as it feels the importance of fostering cultural heritage, and wishes to bring people closer to the region.

There are many volunteers and local residents who come in to make donations of their antiques. One man came in to do this while we were touring, and some of his items were accepted to be evaluated for the collection. Local ties seem to be tight between the Museum and community members.

Multiple Learning Styles

The exhibits were well-done to appeal to children as well as the adult community. There were many opportunities for interactivity in the permanent exhibits of *Waves and Currents*, where there was a child-related activity such as making your own money at each major stop. The *Michael Jordan Discovery Gallery* is focused specifically for children to learn about how sand dunes are formed, or how a Venus flytrap operates.

Multiple learning styles were addressed well throughout the Museum to educate all visitors. The interactive parts of the exhibits were helpful for adults as well as children, and the reading next to the exhibits was helpful, although somewhat long in some cases. Oftentimes it was easier to understand the objects in the exhibits if the labels related the object to who had owned it and what it was used for, adding a context to the object that even visitors can appreciate.

Interviews with the Museum Curator and Historian

“When Does A Story Begin? Sometimes it starts with an undocumented written account, in a brochure or some other secondary source. On other occasions people might make up the story simply because it seems to be a logical fit. One thing is certain, the more times the story is told or written the more believable it becomes.”

- <http://www.nhcgov.com/Cape Fear Museum/faq.asp>

Community

The greater community, beyond the County government, plays a strong role in collection management at the Cape Fear Museum. Volunteers are involved in many activities in the Museum including a current inventory and giving educational tours. As the Museum increases its diversity of story telling, the African American community has become a strong participant in contributing information about objects and oral history. The current history being displayed at the Museum is being critically assessed and thoughts of weaving in a broader community picture, such as the inclusion of more gender and race specific stories, are in planning stages.

From Williston to the World

A community that seems to be underrepresented is the African-American community. Williston High School was the local African-American high school before 1968, when the town schools were integrated. There is an auditorium named after the school with pictures of graduates and their accomplishments as a permanent exhibit. However, we almost missed the exhibit as it is not well-labeled, seeming like simply a place for presentations, and most visitors would not think that there is an exhibit in the auditorium as well. Some work could be done to promote this exhibit in a clearer manner. Eve Carr is working toward establishing good relations with the African-American community to allow a more wholistic picture for tourists and locals alike.

The Wilmington Journal (www.wilmingtonjournal.com), the local African American newspaper in Wilmington, has become a great partner in helping Eve to explore the history. They have agreed to run, free of charge, photos of the African American

community, which the Museum currently has no information, with the caption “Do you know these people?”. The effort has been extremely successful, with all but one photograph being identified. As more leads come in, relating to the photographs, Eve finds that she is spending more and more time pursuing the stories of this population.

Filling the Gaps

Barbara has made a commitment to include the story and regional significance of the object, when displaying them as part of an exhibit. She uses local historians to find the story, such as the woman who runs the North Carolina Room at the New Hanover County Public Library (www.nhcgov.com/lib) or the Historian at the Lutheran Church. Often, through these resources, the story or connection to the community can be found.

The Museum is currently developing a new exhibit on food. As an example of borrowing an object, Barbara found that all of the salt cellars that were most unique were already on display in the permanent exhibit. Instead of showing the same objects, she chose to borrow a salt cellar from the Onslow County Museum, which is still part of the lower Cape Fear region and allows them to show their visitors something new. Barbara’s philosophy is that if there is a gap in the story, she will borrow an object. If a particular object cannot be found or borrowed, she will show a generic example as a symbol of what belongs there. She believes that it is important to give as many visual symbols as possible to help people understand the story.

Education

The education program, which was originally created to go along with the *Waves and Currents* permanent exhibit, has been unaltered since its creation in 1991. One of the first things that the new Museum Educational Coordinator has done is to develop docent training. Her goal is to not only teach them how the script and tour connects to the exhibit, but also to ensure that there is accuracy in the information they are providing to visitors. Her next step is to determine a method of checks and balances for the docents in order to maintain the strength of their presentation.

Collection

The mission of the collection has been relatively the same since its inception in 1980, with the exception of minor tweaking to include 'culture' and 'education'. One tension of managing the collection is dealing with the politics of being funded by the government. The collection is made up entirely of objects made or used in the lower Cape Fear, as this focus is what makes the Cape Fear Museum unique.

The Cape Fear Museum's good rapport with the community allows them to be selective in their collection development, as there are always new objects arriving. When a specific item is being sought for a new exhibition, the Museum publicizes the need to the community and often finds it.

In collecting, Barbara Rowe, the Curator, stated that she errs on the side of taking in too much, as opposed to refusing potentially valuable objects. Some of the questions she asks in assessing new objects include:

- Is this from the lower Cape Fear?
- Why is it important to this region/to this collection?

- Do we already have one?
- Is it a unique specimen?

If there isn't enough information, the Museum may:

- Take the object
- Take the object, research it and return it if it's not an important addition
- Take the object and transfer it to a more appropriate Museum

When determining to deaccession items in the collection, Barbara stated that it is first important to ensure that all parties have agreed that the object needs to go.

Through a hierarchy of decision makers, the determination is decentralized, which allows the collection to remain broad and not under the purview of one individual. The order of approval is:

- Curator (www.nhcgov.com/cfm/cfmstaff.asp)
- Museum Director (www.nhcgov.com/cfm/cfmstaff.asp)
- Collections Committee (as part of the Museum)
- County Museums Board (www.nhcgov.com/cc/boards/Museum.asp)
- New Hanover County Commissioners (www.nhcgov.com/cc/ccmain.asp)

The initial impressions of Eve Carr, the Historian, are that the Museum is currently undergoing a great deal of change. The permanent exhibit, giving an overview of the area and in particular its relationship with the Civil War, was opened in 1991. The education program related to the permanent exhibit has also not gone through much revision in this time. She also felt that it was beneficial to arrive at the Cape Fear Museum as an outsider. It has allowed her to work with the Museum's offering without assumptions of local history or of local historians.

What So Proudly We Hailed and a Director's Lecture

Upon arriving at the Cape Fear Museum (Cape Fear Museum) the front desk staff told us about a lecture the Museum's Director, Ruth Haas, was giving about the

temporary exhibit entitled *What So Proudly We Hailed: Conserving Historic Flags*. Mrs. Haas's lecture focused on the processes involved in the exhibit's creation, flag conservation, and the exhibit's features.

Community

The community was involved in this exhibit from its inception. When the news that the Museum was thinking about hanging the confederate flag (along with other historic Wilmington flags) reached the community it made the front page of the local paper. Heated debate and criticism over the issue did have the beneficial effect of allowing the Museum to address the issue and gain community publicity. The exhibit features items from the Museum's collection of over 100 historic flags, all with links to local culture and history. This exhibit is one in which everyone brings their own understanding, their own story, which will enable anyone to connect with something in the exhibit. That connection could take place through interest in preservation, a memory associated with a certain flag, or a time period associated with a flag.

This community concern was due to the Museum's lack of focus and communication of that focus to the community about the purpose of hanging the flags. Through purposeful design and a clear goal for the exhibit there was not a single complaint about the Flag exhibit. The Director kept waiting to put out fires when the flag conservation exhibit opened, but didn't receive any complaints.

Our only criticism is that this fantastic lecture program was not advertised on the Museum's web site, nor was it advertised on any of the web-based community calendars. Certainly the program would have been of interest to many community

members and tourists wanting to learn more about the exhibit and how the exhibit relates to the Lower Cape Fear.

Collection

During the lecture Mrs. Haas explained the steps involved in creating the exhibit: Define a worthy concept, identify artifacts, construct research, develop a design, and merge the artifacts, research and design into an educational experience. The main focus through all of these steps is to constantly reflect on the mission of the Museum and the artifacts of the Museum. The Director feels this exhibit is successful in attaining these goals. The Museum mission is repeatedly reinforced through the Museum staff members' actions and words, and through the collection. It all comes back to the mission.

During exhibit creation and collection building and maintenance the repeated question is: How does this item relate to the mission/goals of this museum and to the exhibit? The design of this collection had to be done with a great sensitivity to the nature of the items in the collection. The goal was to display materials in the collection without alienating members of the community. This meant focusing more on preservation. This focus created more opportunities for people to connect with the collection and not be threatened by the controversial items on display from the collection, i.e. the Confederate and Nazi flags. By focusing more on preservation and not necessarily on 'why' preserve these specific flags, the focus was taken away from the flags chosen to display.

Flag Conservation

Items that are displayed in the exhibit were chosen for their educational value and if they were stable enough to tolerate display. The value of the items is maintained and sometimes increased when conservation efforts are done. This involves repair for stabilization and for damage done by previous preservation methods. The Museum focuses on raising money for conservation efforts of specific items. One example is a Civil War Battery flag that has an assessed value of \$200,000. Conservation money raised to conserve the flag equaled \$900.00, which covered all expenses.

The goal of flag conservation is to stabilize the object for future generations. This process involves first cleaning the item, special storage, careful display, and tedious repair. Most flags are stored on rolls to prevent damage caused by repeated folding. If display can cause further damage to a flag it will not be used in the exhibit. Some flags are displayed only for a short time then replaced by another item while the original item is allowed to rest. Most of the flags in the collection can be displayed for three months then have to be in dark storage for three years. Creative display methods can increase the time a flag can be on display. An old map case was reused for less fragile flags. This kept them in the dark until the drawer is opened for viewing. A special case was designed and built for very fragile flags that need to stay flat and be out of direct light. The Museum's concern for conservation creates tension with the Museum's desire to educate the community.

Education

“Cape Fear Museum collects, preserves, and interprets objects relating to the history, science, and cultures of the Lower Cape Fear. The Museum makes those objects and their interpretation available to the public through educational exhibition and programs.”

- <http://www.nhc.gov/CFM/CFMservices.asp>

A major portion of the Cape Fear Museum’s mission focuses on education and the focus of this exhibit is to use the exhibit as a vehicle for that learning. Many different learning styles are integrated into this exhibit, examples include but are not limited to interactive videos, hands on investigations, and activities for children. To encourage more meaningful involvement in the exhibit the Museum offers children a flag patch upon completion of a scavenger hunt. Some of the interactive aspects of the exhibit include a flag symbol interactive, a comparison on how different intensities of light affects flags (explaining preservation and display techniques), and mothball versus bullet hole damage with the wheel to change views located at a child level for easy access.

The Director explained the educational exhibit features and through her lecture: Rotating objects through the exhibit or removing them for conservation reasons is explained within the exhibit. Special cases are constructed to protect fragile items. Low lights are used to prevent further damage to the flags; the interactive display explains this. Interactivity is used to involve the visitor in the exhibit and make it more meaningful. The history of the Lower Cape Fear and the science of flag conservation are combined in the exhibit. Damaged objects are displayed to prompt better preservation. An image collection of items not on display makes the exhibit more meaningful.

While the Museum was concerned with not offending the community with the culturally sensitive content of the exhibit, we are glad it did not avoid the topic all together. The presence of these flags in an educational setting challenges the user to think about what these symbols mean to them, to the community, to their history.

Further Questions

We had several conversations with friends as a result of this exhibit; some of the main points of these conversations are summarized here:

- Is the Confederate flag justified in the collection?
Yes, the confederate flag is justified due to the connection to the community, but people's feelings about the flag are controversial.
- What exactly are people's feelings about controversial flags like the Confederate flag and the Nazi flag? Why is the Nazi flag included?
The Nazi flag is in the collection because people from Wilmington brought them back from World War II as souvenirs. Why would a confederate flag be such a big deal? It is something that has strong symbolic meaning for people in the area – for some it is a symbol of racism, ignorance, bigotry, hatred, violence, the KKK – something that people stand strongly for or against. Many Southerners see it as a symbol of their heritage, their history.
- How are flags different from all the Confederate statues around Wilmington and the South?
A statue is something that stands for that person's role in the history of the area. They don't represent the same concepts that the flag represents. Many people in the South are still proud of their past. Southerners don't see the focus as being about slavery, but as part of a whole deck of tools.
- A lot of the misconceptions that northerners have about Southerners include that they are hung up about Civil War and slavery.
Southerners are gracious people, and in recent history Southern communities have had better racial relations than many non-southern cities. Examples include the Cincinnati and Los Angeles race riots.
- Nobody ever talks about the Civil War in the North, why does it seem that the South is still hung-up on it?
Something tragic that happens in your community has a lasting impact; statues honor the people that played a significant role in the event. Up North, since the North won the war and since it was fought on Southern ground, statues are only in the hometowns of the Northern heroes. Southern communities, such as Savannah and Richmond, took the Civil War personally and use monuments and

statues to commemorate it. When something catastrophic happens, the community remembers.

- New York and 9-11.

There's a flag company in Wilmington, one of the woman at the company designed the 9-11 flag, and hence the original prototype is included in this exhibit. This flag makes more of a lasting impression on Northerners visiting the exhibit, it makes them stop and look especially if they are from that area. We are looking for our personal cultural history and ourselves in the exhibit.

- Why is it that everyone has to have another group to oppress? Or to compare to?

The continued tension that some Southerners have against Northerners and vice versa is probably due to the quick conclusions that one makes about the other.

Local culture and history, and preservation are all useful areas of previous knowledge that might be important to understanding this collection. However, anyone's personal background of history helps with the context. Thoughts of the flag and people's call to display and what they find in the history of the flag are thoughts that may cross many visitors' minds.

Conclusion

Some of the strengths of the Museum, as Eve Carr expressed, are its collection, the programming, and the staff who work well together. The weaknesses include financial and spatial limitations and the tension of making connections through exhibits with bringing in tourist dollars. It is difficult to keep the County Museum Board happy, while trying to weave a multi-layered cultural story. One concern that Barbara Rowe mentioned was the size of the staff being so small that it made it difficult to rotate the exhibitions very often. Although there are some small cases that they are able to change monthly, often temporary exhibits remain up for a year. The Museum staff chooses which battles are worth fighting and to which they must concede.

Some ideas we developed to add to the educational impact of the Museum

include the potential of:

- Interpreters added at points throughout certain exhibits
For example, docents dressed in period costumes talking about the time period they represent with stories collected from the local community. It is possible that instead of two people at the front desk, they could take turns as the interpreter in different sections.
- Updated scripts for the docents
The current one is about ten years old and inaccurate in some areas.
- A scavenger hunt or something similar for children through the permanent exhibits to get them involved and searching for specific clues
- A more thorough explanation of the large diorama of the *Waves and Currents* exhibit with some interactivity along the way
- Creating a series of lectures, such as *What So Proudly We Hailed* for those who are interested in going in more depth than the labels can take the visitor, or for those who prefer auditory to visual learning

These small additions could allow a greater understanding of the time periods represented in the Museum.

A further change that we would like to see is a better spatial arrangement of the Museum. Visitors enter at the Giant Sloth and proceed through the *Waves and Currents* exhibit upstairs to the temporary exhibit halls and then down to the gift shop. There are no clear signs and the volunteers behind the desk gave no indications on where to start. For a handicapped visitor, we saw no lift or access for the stairs in the middle of the *Waves and Currents* exhibit, where the general traffic flow leads you. This type of visitor would have to re-trace their entry, leave the exhibit, take the elevator to the second level, which disrupts the plan of the exhibit and is inconvenient. Additionally, *Waves and Currents*, if followed chronologically, seemed to lead into the back of the temporary flag exhibit, which was somewhat disorienting.

Both Eve Carr and Barbara Rowe mentioned that the permanent *Waves and Currents* exhibit needed inclusion of more current materials and of the minority

perspective. However, the only place for this exhibit to expand is into the temporary exhibit room, which creates a space conflict. We are unsure how this will be resolved.

While we realize that staffing concerns make it difficult to take the time for revision, we feel that bringing the Museum into the 20th century will be very important. Creating a strong, focused collection and addressing the gaps in the collection will be equally important and continued identification and classification of the existing collection is the first step towards this. The Museum is on the right path, and working with what resources are available. It is transforming into a true community experience of the Lower Cape Fear with its latest additions.

References

Carr, Eve. Personal Interview. 18 October 2002.

Rowe, Barbara. Personal Interview. 18 October 2002.

Interviews occurred at:

Cape Fear Museum
814 Market St.
Wilmington, NC 28401-4752

Web Site: <http://www.nhcgov.com/CFM/CFMmain.asp>