

A Comparison of Two Exhibits on the 1704 Deerfield Raid: One Actual and One Virtual.

“Presenting a number of perspectives on ‘what happened’ is so crucial—
History is not ever one perspective.”

-- Debra Martin, Hampshire College. (From the Guest book at the
Remembering 1704 exhibit, Flynt museum, Deerfield, MA)



Title: "American Heroes: Mohawk
Date: 1995
Creator: New Ventures P.D.& M.¹

INTRODUCTION:

When I visited the Flynt museum’s exhibit: “Remembering 1704: Context and Commemoration of the Deerfield Raid”, the artifact which had the greatest impact was one of the most contemporary. It was the ‘American Heroes’ action figure toys, produced in 1995. The toy box in the display case contained an ‘action figure’ of Reverend John Williams and one of “a Mohawk”. There was a little accompanying pamphlet with the action figures called: “The Deerfield Massacre”. What struck me about these action figures, and the history provided in the pamphlet was how “the

¹ http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/classroom/curriculum_5th/lesson8/action_toys.html

Mohawk” had no individual identity. While Reverend John Williams had a name, a background and a personal motivation, “The Mohawk” had none of these.

In 1990 I had the unique privilege of taking a course with Eqbal Ahmed, a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern studies at Hampshire College. Something he said has stayed with me and comes up often in my perception of the world today. Eqbal said: “One persons’ terrorist is another persons’ freedom fighter.” A very simple statement that bears a lot of reflection in our current climate.

The action figures of John Williams and “the Mohawk” provided me with a clear picture of what September 11th action figures might look like. One example: “Fire Patrolman Keith Roma” and “the terrorist”. A more appropriate example might be: “Investment Banker from Cantor Fitzgerald: Steve Merkel” and “The terrorist”.

Although I feel great sorrow for the people who died and whose lives were disrupted by the attack on the World Trade Center, I still don’t see how the investment bankers of Cantor Fitzgerald were heroes in the face of terrorism. Can the ‘American way’ really be focused to twin points of avarice and consumption? What happened to ‘truth and justice’? I hope that someday (and it might take 300 years), we might be able to look at the events of September 11th from many different perspectives, as attempted at the Deerfield exhibit. Maybe we will be able to look at the work and lives of investment bankers and see their real part in the story instead of this black hat/white hat view that we have now “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.”²

² NPR transcript. All Things Considered. 9/20/01. President George W. Bush addresses Congress and the nation regarding America’s fight against terrorism. from LexisNexis. Viewed 3/29/05.

In addition to this somewhat consuming reaction to the ‘action figures’ I also reviewed the differences between the actual exhibit and the virtual exhibit, and each attempt to include the different perspectives of the Deerfield raid in 1704.

The Flynt Museum Exhibit:

The actual museum exhibit had a pleasing feel to it. The low light and circular navigation through the exhibit was very calming. The individual smaller exhibit areas gave the user a feeling of intimate personal interaction with the events. However, if the exhibit had been crowded, the individual alcoves might have become claustrophobic. When I was there were at most 7 individuals and not all at the same time, so, I was pretty free to interact, gaze and take my time. Unfortunately the low lighting that created an intimate feel, and (more importantly) helped to preserve artifacts, was not conducive to really looking at the text, especially the original documents (or displays of copies of the original documents.)

The artifacts presented were interesting. I appreciated the attempt to present the different perspectives of the people involved. I loved the similarity in presentation of the symbols from the five cultures: English, French, Kanienkehaka (Mohawk), Wendat (Huron) and Wôbanaki (Abenaki, Pennacook, Sokoki, Pocumtuck and others). That said, I did not think that the exhibit utilized the symbols to great effect. In reviewing the details of the perceptions from each of the cultures involved in the Deerfield attack, I did not really find very detailed or unique motivating factors for each of the Native American groups. There were some parts of the exhibit that explained certain aspects of the motivations and perceptions of the different groups, but these

instances were not coordinated with one another. For example, in the exhibit, there is an explanation about the church bell that the Kanienkehaka had been expecting as a present from the French, which they believed had been stolen and sold to John Williams for his church in Deerfield. However, this information could have been presented together in an alcove with information about English, French, Wendat, and Wôbanaki motivations.

This was done with great effect in the virtual version of this exhibit. That said there was one very interesting perspective that was represented in the museum which was not represented on the web. That was the contemporary perspective of visitors to the exhibit. I was very interested in the remarks and reviews of people (especially the students) about the exhibit. One of my favorites was the remark made by Debra Martin which I quote at the beginning of the paper. The other favorite was:

“Years from now the 9-11 events will probably look similar if there are people willing to present the views, culture, tradition and motives of ALL the peoples involved. The similarities that I think I see are eerie.”

--B. Warner, Terryville, CT.

Finally, the museum was not very kid-friendly. Most items had ‘Please Do Not Touch’ signs and there was no alternative tactile interaction. Obviously, allowing everyone to touch artifacts will cause the breakdown and eventual demise of the artifact. However, it was suggested to me that similar materials without the same historical significance could have been placed beside the artifact³ with a description saying something like: “This is the type of wood that the Deerfield residence used to build houses and doors. And this is how it might feel if it was sanded-down and fashioned into a door.” Or next to the cooking pot a recipe for something that might have been cooked in that pot and a picture

³ Shepherd, Kelcy. Commented on either in class or at the Panda East restaurant in Amherst, MA. Either 3/26/05 or 3/22/05/

of it cooking in a similar pot. I was also disappointed in the logistics of the video display.

I thought that the volume was way too low — even with one other person in the exhibit I could not hear a lot of the narration.

Raid on Deerfield: The Many Stories of 1704—The Website:

In contrast with the actual exhibit, I loved the look of this website. The colors were great. The five symbols representing the five cultures were used to great effect. The flash movie introduction was dramatic, well narrated and provided a great context with which to view the rest of the site. However, this site had so much going on, in a non-linear fashion; it was difficult to look at everything. With four separate trips to the website I was not able to read all of the content. Having said that the website is organized in such a way that if a user were doing research on a particular aspect, they would easily be able to find what they were looking for. An example of this being the user experience for my son Max. Max heard the music that I was playing from the 18th cent. English and French part of the site. He was very interested and wanted me to keep playing it. I did and when he asked to hear it again a few days later, it was very easy to navigate to the correct spot within a few clicks. The only thing he didn't like was that there wasn't more music from the Native American cultures.

From a technical perspective I was very pleased with the images on the site. I was able to use the zoom feature and the resolution feature to view the originals of the artifacts and I really liked the text translation feature that showed in type the text of the documents. This would have been a good feature in the actual exhibit.

Conclusion:

The look of the five symbols representing the five cultures was consistent in both the virtual and actual exhibits of the attack on Deerfield. I found this to be very confusing considering how different each exhibit was organized and presented. The actual exhibit did not utilize the symbols to great effect, and much of the background information that made the symbols useful (and symbolic) was left out. The exhibit was also not terribly successful in presenting the motivations for each culture that would have helped the visitor to distinguish the differences between the participants of the attack on Deerfield. On the other hand, the virtual exhibit utilized the symbols to great effect. There was an overwhelming amount of information about each of the groups. The website provided content examples of the background, and motivation of each group involved in the Deerfield raid. It also provided images, maps, timelines, artifacts and audio to give the user a wonderful experience. These two exhibits are a striking example of what is the best about the internet; if it's done right you can have a better experience, drinking coffee in your bathrobe without the hassle of actually going there. I only hope that 300 years from now we might be able to provide a similarly objective (or similarly attempted objectivity) about the culture, backgrounds and motivations of all of the groups involved in the attack on September 11th, 2001.