

To: Dr. Moore

From: Malina Suity

Date: 9/20/10

Re: Davidson, James West and Mark H. Lytle. 2010. *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Traditional historians use tools of detection such as perspective, reconstruction, and psychohistory to uncover the hidden motivations of certain people or groups of people in history. Public historians can build upon the results of traditional research by using such skills as storytelling, interpretation, and appraisal to communicate a more complex history to their audience.

In the case study of the Virginia Colony, historians set out to reveal why the colony grew into a “slave society” relatively late in its development (49). With this goal in mind, they used perspective to put themselves in the place of planters looking for workers. They researched the prices of importing indentured servants as opposed to buying slaves, widening the context of the research to the surrounding economic conditions. They also studied the death rate in Virginia in each decade in the 1600s. With this information they were able to conjecture that, although slaves were “the better buy” at the time, they were more expensive than servants and “everyone [was] dying anyway” (49). Public historians, having done this research themselves or having selected it for their purpose, can use it to add a dimension—the perspective of the landowning planters—to the story of slavery in the Virginia Colony in a museum exhibit, tour lecture, or living history demonstration.

The story of the writing of the Declaration of Independence is well known, yet in the case study of the Declaration, historians aimed to discover what the ideas were that led Jefferson to write those particular words. Historians in this case reconstructed the “intellectual worlds behind his words” (86) by finding out what books Jefferson had in his library, what his professors lectured on when he was in school, and generally what kinds of ideas people were talking about at the time (89). They also took into account the events surrounding the Declaration, specifically Virginia’s new constitution, drafted by George Mason. Documents such as the Declaration, along with many that are not so famous, are included by public historians in documentary collections on any number of topics. Employing the research achieved by traditional methods, documentary editors interpret primary sources within the context of the subject of their collection in order to connect each document included to the others and to add to the breadth of knowledge on that subject.

The subject of John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry seems clear at first, but in the case study regarding the event, historians endeavored to understand Brown’s motives and whether or not he was mad as some of his contemporaries claimed. To achieve their goal, historians used psychohistory to analyze and detect patterns of behavior in Brown that might “reflect a clinically recognized mental disorder” (159). They compared trial affidavits of people who knew Brown along with a letter authored by the man himself that describes his childhood experiences and feelings in some detail. With this evidence, historians diagnosed Brown with bipolar disorder and suggested that his disorder along with an extreme fixation on the wrongs of slavery impelled him to organize the attack (168). Archivists, who might have letters like the one Brown wrote to Harry Stearns, must use traditional methods such as psychohistory to appraise the significance of documents in their keeping. A personal letter might seem to some to be of no consequence but it is the archivist’s responsibility to do the research and make sure that it is not lost.

The audiences in each case might be different; in the archivist’s case it would be the power in their organization to which they must justify their decisions, in the documentary editors it would be the readers of their finished collection, and in the case of a museum or national park the audience would be the viewing public. However, each case study reveals tools of the traditional historian that the public historian finds essential to his or her work in communicating and preserving a more complete history.