

Teaching Notes

A Colonial “Living History” Museum Addresses Colonialism: Plimoth Plantation in the 21st Century

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to discuss how the past informs the present, and how the present reads the past.
- Students will appreciate the role of the narrator(s) in making historical accounts.
- Students will be able to describe how cultural traditions can intersect with contemporary issues.
- Students will be able to describe how stereotypes function and are perpetuated, and appreciate some of the challenges of attempting to disrupt them.
- Students will appreciate historical complexity and the challenge of making historical understanding accessible.
- Students will understand how social movements (AIM) can influence society.
- Students will be able to see that institutions can change and that, therefore, societies can change.

Audience: This case is suitable for students in high school or college, and appropriate for classes in history, U.S. history, Native American studies, education, and sociology. It is especially useful for students who are studying to become public educators and who aim to work in museums, libraries, archives, and other institutions that document and interpret history.

Related Cases: Other cases on the website that pertain, in similar ways, to issues of representation in historical works include *The Twilight Saga and the Quileute Indian Tribe: Opportunity or Cultural Exploitation?*; *TRIBAL TV: Is it Worth the Effort?*; and *What should be displayed? Native arts in museums and on the runways.*

Implementation Suggestions: This case lends itself to a range of teaching methods. Its three sections can be examined separately by three different groups of students. The first group, studying “Colonial History at Plimoth Plantation,” can visit the museum’s website and conduct background research on the Separatists. They can link close study of the first section of the case with appropriate questions above, and they can generate questions of their own. The second group, studying “Establishing the Wampanoag Homesite,” can examine the web links that tell the story of the museum’s shift toward a bicultural mission. This group can further examine the influence of AIM in the United States in general by using the links in the footnotes and by doing library research. The third group, studying “Museum Design and Cultural Encounters,” can compare in detail how colonial and Native history are presented at the museum and consider the ensuing effects on museum-goers and museum itself. This third group can be further split in

half: one group can examine how the museum depicts colonial history and uses museum staff to do so, and the other can study the museum's treatment of Native history and how Native staff represent that history. Students can consider topics such as whether it's possible to tell a "complete story" of history, the appeal of such stories, the challenges of making history interesting, and the difficulties of teaching the history of colonialism without perpetuating stereotypes. They can consider what happens when history becomes "entertainment."

Discussion Questions:

What are cultural history museums for?

What are American history museums for, and what should they communicate to the public?

What are some of the challenges of teaching history by means of museums? By means of living history museums?

What are some of the differences between how the museum tells the histories of the Pilgrim settlers and of the indigenous peoples of the region? How has Plimoth Plantation tried to do justice to the complexity of these histories? Has the museum succeeded, in whole or in part?

Cultural sensitivity and awareness are important social values. But the terms of these values change over time. Using the case, make a timeline noting years when important turning points took place in the life of the museum. What did cultural sensitivity and awareness mean for Plimoth Plantation in 1947? 1971? 1992? 2018? How do you account for the changes?

Imagine that you are the director of Plimoth Plantation. What do you think the museum's next steps should be in order to be true to its aim to be bicultural?

Look over the Frequently Asked Questions. How should the last five questions be answered?

Consider that the descendants of the Pilgrims who established Plimoth Plantation are determined by bloodline, but according to the explanation quoted on p. 10, for Native identity bloodline is not sufficient. How do you account for these differences?

Historical curiosity can be muted when the past is seen as a set of conflicts between good and bad people, or between people with viable claims to sovereignty and people whose claims are not viable. The museum essentially bypasses these issues. Why do you think the museum maintains its focus on everyday life? Do you agree or disagree with this focus? Explain your point of view.