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Interpreting Difference through Different Interpretations:

Ethnohistories at Plimoth Plantation

### **Introduction**

While cultural heritage sites have immeasurably complex social implications, the educational potency of these places is especially fundamental. As people visit a given cultural heritage site, their understanding is greatly influenced not just by tangible materiality, but also by the interpretations generated by the site managers. These interpretations, which are partly developed using relevant archaeological research, serve as essential educational mechanisms that construct a site's narrative. In turn, this narrative shapes visitors' experiences and ideological perspectives relative to the site. Through a critical examination of a cultural heritage site's research and interpretation techniques, it is possible to analyze the ways in which research shapes interpretation, and whether such interpretation contributes to an informed understanding of the site.

Plimoth Plantation, as a popular destination at which many visitors experience cultural heritage, offers an ideal opportunity to engage these theoretical issues of interpretational impact. A privately owned, non-profit museum and archaeological curation site, Plimoth Plantation is designed to relate a bicultural history of the indigenous Wampanoag People and the English Colonists in 17<sup>th</sup> century Plymouth, Massachusetts. Located approximately two miles away from the original settlement built by the English Colonists, it includes reconstructions of both

Wampanoag and English communities as they were believed to have looked in the 1600s.<sup>1</sup> Due to the concurrent inclusion of Wampanoag and English perspectives at the site, it is necessary to understand how site managers negotiate these two perspectives and how the resulting juxtaposition affects the holistic site interpretation. At Plimoth Plantation, the site interpretation fails to effectively narrate an intricate history of colonial contact between the Wampanoag People and the English Colonists and instead reinforces ethnically distinct methodological approaches to cultural heritage.

### **Site Background**

To better comprehend the contemporary implications of Plimoth Plantation, it is important to first consider its context as a cultural heritage site. Founded in 1946 by Henry Hornblower II, a Harvard educated archaeologist, Plimoth Plantation is a reconstruction of how the colonial landscape is thought to have looked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, the period spelling of “Plimoth Plantation” was chosen over the more modern “Plymouth Plantation” as part of an effort to make the experience as historically authentic as possible.

Due to his disciplinary background, Hornblower proposed that archaeology be a central component of the reconstruction process. By executing archaeological fieldwork and using the findings to help create the museum, this “was to be scientific history, and, in some measure, a repudiation of the filio-pietistic traditions of Pilgrim Plymouth which had dominated interpretations of the Pilgrim story since 1820.”<sup>2</sup> Previous portrayals of these 17<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> “About Plimoth Plantation.” *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/about/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Gomes, Peter J. “Henry Hornblower II.” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. 97 (1985): 157-158.

English Colonists, which helped to popularize this “Pilgrim” terminology, were characterized by reenactments of historically questionable events, such as their landing on Plymouth Rock in 1620 and their cooperative negotiation of a treaty with the Wampanoag leader Massasoit.<sup>3</sup> Although these depictions of the Colonists are no longer performed at Plimoth Plantation, vestiges of this linger within contemporary interpretation methodology. In particular, this legacy of reenactment is manifested in the use of on-site role players.

Since this site is not only theatrically recreated but also physically reconstructed, it is important to recognize Plimoth Plantation as a living history museum rather than a preserved archaeological site. As defined by John D. Krugler, living history museums are “all rebuilt or restored according to the best available historical, archaeological, and architectural data” and “perform three basic functions. They teach visitors about their buildings, the artifacts housed therein, and the people who once lived there. They preserve the remains of the past, often constructing replicas to replace what has not survived. They conduct research to discover and record what it is they are saving and to inform their educational programs.”<sup>4</sup> Following this model, Plimoth Plantation relies heavily upon continuous scholarly research in the absence of enduring tangible structures. Using this research, heritage professions are able to convey particular narratives to visitors through on-site interpretation.

However, the interpretation assumes different forms depending upon whose history is being told, which becomes obvious when considering two distinct ethnohistorical sites at Plimoth Plantation: the Wampanoag Homesite and 1627 English Village. The Wampanoag

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<sup>3</sup> Snow, Stephen Eddy. *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimoth Plantation*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. Print. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Krugler, John D. “Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48.3 (1991): 347.

Homesite, evocative of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Wampanoag summer encampment, allows visitors to experience the culture of the Wampanoag People, including the types of homes they lived in, the food they ate, and the crafts they produced. At the 1627 English Village, there is also a focus on daily cultural practices, ranging from farming techniques to domestic chores. While both of these sites rely upon interpreters to act as mediators between the visitors and their surroundings, these interpreters serve different functions depending upon which history they are telling. As stated by the Plimoth Plantation website:

[At the 1627 English Village,] the people you will meet are costumed role players who have taken on the names, viewpoints and life histories of the people who actually lived in the colony in 1627, popularly known as the “Pilgrims” today. Each one has a unique story to tell.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast:

The people you will meet at the Wampanoag Homesite talk of the past, but their story is also a very current one, told from a modern perspective... It is important to note that unlike the 1627 English Village, there are no “characters” here; the staff dressed in traditional deerskin clothing are Native People and speak in their own modern words about the experiences of the Wampanoag.<sup>6</sup>

This fundamental difference in the role of on-site interpreters must be interrogated deeper so as to understand why such a contrast exists.

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<sup>5</sup> “1627 English Village.” *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/features/village.php>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Wampanoag Homesite.” *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/features/homesite.php>>.

## Archaeological Methodology

The utilization of such divergent interpretation is partly an extension of differing research methodologies at Plimoth Plantation. Rooted in the scholarly legacy of founder Henry Hornblower II, Plimoth Plantation pursues ongoing archaeological research in order to excavate relevant artifacts and discover new historically pertinent information. Accordingly, the scholarly content of the site interpretation is subject to constant revision as new information is literally unearthed. Amidst this dynamic academic process, interpretation methodology has remained fundamentally unchanged due to a faulty archaeological approach that favors Wampanoag ambiguity and English Colonial specificity.

To reconstruct the 1627 English Village, Plimoth Plantation has excavated and curated a number of local 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial sites. These sites include the homes of particular historical figures such as the colonial governor William Bradford, who actually lived in the settlement and is currently portrayed by on-site role players. Discoveries of ceramics, pipes, metal tools, nails, architectural remnants, personal items, and weapons at these archaeological sites have been invaluable in the process of recreating the English Colonists' firsthand narratives.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike these archaeological undertakings, based upon excavations of well-documented historical structures, the material evidence used to reconstruct the Wampanoag Homesite is more imprecise. Numerous archaeological sites across New England have been employed in the process, thereby denying geographic and cultural specificity to the Wampanoag archaeological record. Demonstrating a lack of attention to detail, the artifacts used by Plimoth Plantation to reconstruct the Wampanoag Homesite “consist of projectile points, fishing weights, hammer

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<sup>7</sup> “Colonial Archaeology.” *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/discover/archeology/colonial.php>>.

stones, celts and other stone tools from the Archaic Period through the Contact Period... [ranging] from the South Shore, Cape Cod, and Martha's Vineyard."<sup>8</sup> This approach operates as a result of a severely flawed premise which assumes that all pre-colonial artifacts found in the region are reflective of the material culture of the Wampanoag communities that were in contact with the English Colonists.

This generalization functions both geographically, as shown by the fact that the artifacts origins span a nearly fifty mile radius, and culturally. During the era that Plimoth Plantation seeks to recreate, the Wampanoag Nation was composed of at least thirty distinct ethnic groups, but a disregard for this fact within archaeological research assumes a single Wampanoag cultural standard.<sup>9</sup> By including artifacts found "from the Archaic Period through the Contact period," heritage managers at Plimoth Plantation also imply that Wampanoag culture was completely static before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Not only is this factually inaccurate, but it also denies the Wampanoag People a pre-colonial history.

### **Interpretation Methodology**

This trend of hyperspecificity for the English Colonial perspective and gross generalizing for the Wampanoag perspective is pervasive in not only the archaeological methodology, but also in the interpretation methodology. While the 1627 English Village makes use of role players who perform reenactments of daily life in the colony and assume the personas of particular historical figures, the Wampanoag Homesite employs contemporary narrators who

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<sup>8</sup> "Native Archaeology." *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/discover/archeology/native.php>>.

<sup>9</sup> Travers, Milton A. *The Wampanoag Indian Federation of the Algonquin Nation: Indian Neighbors of the Pilgrims*. Boston: The Christopher Publishing House. 1957. Print. 16.

“speak in their own modern words about the experiences of the Wampanoag.” Much like the archaeological approaches at Plimoth Plantation, these divergent tactics in the interpretation process work within a flawed paradigm. In this case, differences in chronology and ethnohistorical narration create individual, temporally exact English Colonial perspectives that contrast with collective, temporally vague Wampanoag perspectives.

Relative to the issue of chronology, the 1627 English Village is much more specific than the Wampanoag Homesite. As even suggested by the name, the narrative of the 1627 English Village is limited to the experiences of the Colonists during one particular year. The actions and words of the role players at the Village are designed to reflect the daily routines of the Colonists who actually lived in Plymouth during this exact year:

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the role players you meet stay “in character” and that for them, the year is 1627. Remember, when you enter the 1627 English Village, you are in the year 1627, too... [and] they will not recognize any events after 1627.<sup>10</sup>

While the employees at the Wampanoag Homesite are presented to be visually reminiscent of this same time period, they offer a much more extensive historical account:

You will meet Native staff members wearing traditional Wampanoag clothing of the 1600s. All these staff members are Native People. Although dressed in clothes of the past, they speak from a modern perspective about Wampanoag history and culture. They are not role players.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” *plimoth.org*. Plimoth Plantation, n.d. Web. 29 November 2009.

<<http://www.plimoth.org/features/faqs/>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Ironically, this decision to present the Wampanoag Homesite in such a chronologically ambiguous manner does not even prompt the site managers to encourage visitors to spend more time there; it is suggested that visitors spend at least two hours at the 1627 English Village to understand the details of this particular epoch, yet they say only one hour is needed to understand nearly 400 years of Wampanoag history since the Pilgrims first landed in Plymouth in 1620. This consequently burdens the Wampanoag Homesite staff with having to narrate a violent, highly contested colonial history. Meanwhile, the English Colonial perspective is privileged due to its relegation to a moment in time that predates much of this interethnic hostility.

Also embedded in the interpretation methodology is the idea that the Wampanoag Homesite staff can somehow articulate a collective indigenous experience, while the role players at the 1627 English Village are only required to speak to the experiences of one particular colonial figure. Although visitors are encouraged to ask questions of all interpreters, the answers to these questions operate within two different contexts, which render the role players of the 1627 English Village as individuals and the staff members of the Wampanoag Homesite as a collective group. By not granting the nuance of individuality to the Wampanoag Homesite staff members, site managers displace firsthand Wampanoag perspectives. In this manner, visitors are unable to critically consider the diversity within the Wampanoag community. Instead, they hear the Wampanoag Homesite interpretation as a series of ethnic voices, clashing with the specificity of the individual voices presented by the 1627 English Village interpretation.

## **Implications**

These differing approaches to interpretation at the Wampanoag Homesite and the 1627 English Village, while not intentionally malicious, detrimentally impact the educational value of



the site. Even though Plimoth Plantation professes cultural sensitivity, the ways in which the site managers pursue this goal is fairly counterproductive. Oddly, the choice to have staff members at the Wampanoag Homesite recount an extensive ethnic history is designed “to make visitors aware of generalizations and stereotypes about Native People, and to inform them of issues and concerns that Wampanoag People face today.”<sup>12</sup> Considered alongside the reenactments and role playing of the 1627 English Village, this would actually seem to reinforce the “generalizations” to which the site managers claim to proactively respond. Unfortunately, this does little to combat ignorance and effectively educate visitors about historical nuances. Rather, it imposes a form of ethnic monolithism that homogenizes the Wampanoag People across space and time.

The interpretive methods at the two sites are not only faulty in their presentation of information differently, but also in their presentation of information separately. To distinguish so clearly between the 1627 English Village and the Wampanoag Homesite is to suggest that these two ethnohistories are not intricately intertwined. Despite the desire to present Plimoth Plantation as authentically as possible, the 1627 English Village and the Wampanoag Homesite have become culturally coded spaces which establish the two groups as neighbors lacking any syncretic interactions. As recounted by historian Jill Lepore in a recent PBS documentary about the history of Plymouth:

In a sense, the two peoples come to share a great deal... [T]he English come to be more like Indians in many ways. They dress more like Indians. They use Indian words. They're familiar with Indian ways. And the Indians come to be more like English. A lot of Indians speak English. They wear English clothes. They build houses that are English. There's a reciprocity of exchange.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “After the Mayflower.” *We Shall Remain*. PBS. WGBH Boston. 13 April 2009. Television.

By choosing to ignore this history and instead establish a neighbor narrative at Plimoth Plantation, site managers do not effectively illustrate the multifaceted interchanges that resulted from colonial encounters between the Wampanoag and the English. A truly cohesive representation of this history “means more than adding yet another dimension of cultural difference” as has been done with the portrayal of the Wampanoag People at Plimoth Plantation.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the process of narrating the differences of two peoples should not necessarily entail two entirely different methodological approaches in interpretation, nor should it occur at two entirely separate sites.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Plimoth Plantation is a tale of two ethnohistories. As a cultural heritage tourism destination, Plimoth Plantation allows visitors an opportunity to experience a history of the Wampanoag People and the English Colonists in 17<sup>th</sup> century Plymouth, Massachusetts. Through archaeological evidence, site managers have created the Wampanoag Homesite and the 1627 English Village, which give visitors an experience within a reconstructed historical landscape. However, the methodology concerning Wampanoag archaeology is extremely generalized in comparison to English Colonial archaeology, resulting in two very different site interpretations. At the 1627 English Village, role players performing as actual Colonists speak as individuals in a specific historical moment, but at the Wampanoag Homesite, staff members narrate a collective history that spans nearly four centuries. This consequently propagates a false image of the Wampanoag People as a homogenous community. Also, it portrays the

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<sup>14</sup> Rubertone, Patricia E. “The Historical Archaeology of Native Americans.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 29 (2000): 439.

Wampanoag People and English Colonists as culturally distinct neighbors who simply lived alongside one another without elaborate interrelations.

While this interpretive methodology certainly deserves praise for its inclusion of multiple perspectives at the same site, a better strategy would be to construct a more comprehensive narrative that portrays these ethnohistories as undeniably interconnected. Although this paradigmatic shift at Plimoth Plantation may not be easy, it is a way to better relate the site's history as one of dynamic, complicated, cross-cultural human interaction that continues to this day.

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