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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

How to Run a Reenactment - Introduction to Reenactments and Reenactors, Part 1

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Reenactments, meaning special events that use outside costumed interpreters, are a great way for sites to engage visitors and host memorable programs that build a following. Planning and executing a reenactment can be a daunting challenge for a site that has never hosted one. Like any special event, you have to make sure you have the staffing, resources, and logistics to handle the event. There might also be resistance from higher ups who worry

about public safety and bad press from allowing outside groups to participate in programming for the site.

These are legitimate issues, but they can be mitigated by solid planning and working with credible reenactors and reenactment units. The purpose of this article is to give an overview of how to plan and run a reenactment at an established historic site. There will be three parts to this article series: the first part of the article will give an overview of reenactments and reenactors in general, the second will explain what overarching questions you need to ask before and during planning your reenactment, and the last will get into the specific details of planning, logistics, marketing, and running a reenactment.

Some background and caveats: I have nearly 20 years of experience in both participating in and running reenactments, but my experiences are limited to the United States. The basics of producing a reenactment are the same regardless of location but you will need to do research to find out specific details, such as laws and insurance regulations, for your own country and locality. This is important because nothing generates bad press for a site like inspectors coming in to shut down your event because you forgot to file the right permits or notify the appropriate authorities of your event. It will be hard to convince people to come out for your next event after that.

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Each reenactment unit or individual has their own guidelines and standards for authenticity and interpretation. Some allow modern items such as glasses or shoes if they are not distracting or visible. Others insist on everything being a vetted reproduction or an original. There are some vigorous debates in the reenactment community over which clothing patterns and reproduction items are

What is a Reenactment?

Reenactments have many names and there is much debate about those names. You might hear reenactment, living history event, hands-on-history, military timeline, grand tactical, history alive, etc. For the purposes of this article, I am going to use the term reenactment and define it as “using outside people and/or groups to interpret history at an established historical site or museum for a special event”.

There are two main parts to this definition: using outside people and/or groups, and the special event. The first part implies using people who do not regularly volunteer at or are employed by a site. This is an important distinction as people who are employed by a site or who are regular volunteers should be familiar with the site’s history, interpretive plan, and daily operations. They are usually covered by the site’s insurance and liability policy.

The important aspect in the second part of the definition of reenactment is “special event”. While many reenactments are “regular” events in that a site will host them at the same time

the best and which are "farby", i.e. lacking in accuracy.

each year, reenactments require more staff, resources, and planning than other programs.

Any site can host a reenactment. Even living history sites/open air museums with their own costumed interpreters, who regularly do first person interpretive programs, can bring in outside reenactors. These reenactors can work with them for special events or provide additional interpretation that is normally not presented on site. For example, George Washington's Mount Vernon has its own staff of costumed interpreters. They have several events a year where they invite outside groups to provide additional interpretation, staged battle demonstration, and a colonial market fair. The largest of these events hosts dozens of American Revolutionary War reenactment units and individual reenactors, equaling hundreds of additional reenactors on the property.

Why Host a Reenactment?

Reenactments can be a good way to expand the historic interpretation at your site and provide public programs that cannot be done with the existent site staff and volunteers. It is a way to transform your site into a living history museum for a day or a weekend without having to recruit and train loads of new volunteers and staff.

Reenactors can provide hands-on demonstrations of period skills and trades for the public and demonstrate the use of working period/reproduction items at the site such as spinning wheels and looms, blacksmith tools, or cooking tools. They can explore periods of history that are associated with your site but outside of its main interpretation period. For example, hosting a reenactment for a specific war time period if a resident of your site joined the military, or hosting events that correlate with the time periods that are popular with reenactors and also mentioned in journals or diaries from residents at your site.

Lastly, reenactments can be wildly popular and good money-makers if your site can charge admission. In my area, reenactments helped save a historic mansion that would otherwise have been razed and redeveloped into a housing subdivision. Having attendance boosts of 500 to over 1000 people per event at an otherwise sleepy historic site convinced the county not to sell the property and keep it open as a historic house museum.

Types of Reenactments

Using our definition, there are many events that qualify as reenactments. Thus, there are many options from which a site can choose. Here is a brief description of some of the most common.

Military Encampment

Probably the most common type of reenactment is the military encampment, where one or

more military units interpret military history at a site. Many times, these reenactments involve a battle or skirmish and weapons demonstrations. There might be a civilian contingent within the camps representing the proverbial “camp-followers” and/or a separate civilian camp portraying local townspeople, residents of the site, or just representing civilian life of the time.

Battle Reenactment

Battle reenactments involve a military encampment but are focused on recreating a specific battle such as Gettysburg, Hastings, Waterloo, or Kalkriese. Battle reenactments can be some of the largest reenactments, involving up to tens of thousands of reenactors over many hectares of land. There is usually a lot of coordination between the units ahead of time so that everyone knows their role in the battle, all the maneuvers planned for the battle, and most importantly, who “wins” the battle. These reenactments can require a lot of oversight, insurance, logistics and planning, for obvious reasons. They are not recommended as a first-time reenactment for sites.

Timeline

Timeline events host units from various eras in a contiguous timeline on the site. These units can be all military, all civilian, or a mix of both. Some timeline events are limited to an era such as 20th century or focused on a theme such as maritime or medical units throughout history. In addition to unit displays, there are often other activities such as field demos from each of the units, period dancing, fashion shows, and the purely for fun but always popular, “battle through the ages” where the units from different times mock-battle each other until the last man standing.

Hands-on-History

Hands-on-history days are popular with a lot of sites. They are included in the reenactment category because they often include reenactors who explain their camp and/or provide hands on demos for the public. These events can be themed, like a harvest festival, focused on a specific time period like Victorian, or interpret a variety of historical skills and crafts that are fun and appealing to family visitors.

Immersion Events

Immersion events aim to present a “slice-of-life” type of experience for the public. While generally not as formal as true museum theater, these reenactments are like impromptu street theater or visiting a full-time living history site. Some of these events attempt to recreate a specific historical event like a funeral, wedding, trial, or public spectacle that happened at the site. Other events attempt to recreate an ordinary “day in the life” at a historic site. Many immersion events use planned “skits” or interactions with other reenactors during the event, such as a confrontation between two gossips or a press gang searching for an escaped sailor. Often reenactors at these events are focused on their interpretation

rather than on educating the public, and will not engage with the public unless they are addressed directly.

Tacticals/Private Events

Reenactors will host private events that are closed to the public. Usually these are done off-site but sometimes they are hosted on historic sites. Often these are called “tacticals”, as they center around a military scenario with mock battles or skirmishes. Other events are hosted in period barracks, cabins, or other historic structures and can be military, civilian, or a mix of both. Reenactors spend a weekend living and working in period clothing and doing chores and other daily tasks in as period a way as possible. Private events allow reenactors to hone their skills by “living in the moment” in a historical setting without having the responsibility of interacting with visitors. Some sites allow reenactors to host their own private event as a thank you for doing public events at the site throughout the year. Other sites allow reenactors to rent the site for this purpose.

Who are Reenactors?

Like trying to pin down one term for reenactments, reenactors prefer different terms when they refer to themselves. You will hear reenactor, living historian, progressive, campaigner, and historic interpreter, among others. These terms can be very personal and people can be very insistent that they are a specific term and do not associate with other terms. That is a subject for another article. For the purposes of this article, a reenactor is any person who uses historical clothing and artifacts to interpret a specific time and persona and who is not associated with a historical site through employment or volunteering.

The distinction between being employed by a historical site or a regular site volunteer is an important one. Employees and volunteers are bound by a site’s interpretive plan and policies. Those plans and policies are supposed to be supported by research done by the site and the larger academic community. In contrast, while many reenactors are trained historians and some work and/or volunteer at historic sites, for their reenacting impression, they are independent. They conduct research on their own and their impression(s) are generally not tied to one specific historical site.

Each reenactment unit or individual has their own guidelines and standards for authenticity and interpretation. Some allow modern items such as glasses or shoes if they are not distracting or visible. Others insist on everything being a vetted reproduction or an original. There are some vigorous debates in the reenactment community over which clothing patterns and reproduction items are the best and which are “farby”, i.e. lacking in accuracy. If you have costumed interpreters at your site, your standards might be vastly different than a reenactment unit’s standards. These are considerations that will be addressed in parts 2 and 3 of this article series.

Furthermore, a unit's interpretation might not be the same as how you interpret at your site. Hearing different interpretations can be very confusing to the public if it is not clear to them why there are different interpretations. I was visiting Fort York in Canada, which was burned by the United States during the War of 1812. The Canadians had a very different interpretation of that event than I did, being from the United States. Needless to say, I was a bit cheeky and thanked them for keeping the site nice for us Americans.

Types of Reenactors

This next section gives a basic overview of the types of group and individuals who reenact. It is by no means comprehensive nor meant to be an exhaustive list.

Uniformed Unit

Here in the United States, the most common reenactment unit is a group of reenactors who portray a specific military unit or an organized uniformed civilian unit such as the Red Cross, from a specific time period. Examples are: the Rhode Island 5th from the American Civil War, the Harlem Hellfighters, aka the 369th American Infantry from World War I, or the Land Girls. These units can be solely military/uniformed impressions or have a mix of civilian and military uniforms. Civilians are often "camp-followers", women and children who followed their husbands and other family members on campaign, and other civilians with the unit. Other civilians do auxiliary impression such as sutlers or peddlers, camp laundry, clergy, local townsfolk, medical personnel, refugees, etc. Military units always have their weapons, such as firearms, and some have artillery weapons and/or vehicles. Cavalry units often bring horses and expect to ride on site. Depending on the event and space available, a unit can bring personal and/or large group tents, camp gear such as cooking pots, supply boxes, bedrolls, tarps, gun racks, and displays of personal items and other items from the time period.

Civilian Unit

Civilian units are made up of only civilians from a time period, who are not part of a uniformed unit. They might be interpreting an organized group such as the Suffragettes, a specific type of civilian such as the Ragged Victorians who interpret lower class Victorians c. 1851, or the Sons and Daughters of Ham, who interpret contraband African-Americans during the American Civil War. Some civilian interpretations will focus on one task such as a camp laundry or a spinning bee, or there will be a variety of activities as in a refugee camp. The main difference between a military and a civilian camp is weapons. Military camps may have things people can handle, and civilian reenactors don't necessarily want grubby hands on everything, especially with sharp tools or original items.

Independents

Independents are either individuals or small groups who are not associated with a formal, organized group. Some independents portray famous figures in history and are known for those impressions. Sometimes these people are paid for their impressions, especially if they

are specifically invited for an event. Other people have their own specialized displays, such as a tradesperson, or are the only person who does their particular military or uniformed impression.

Recruiting Reenactors

Before you start planning an event, you need to get to know the reenactors in your area who might be willing to come to an event at your site. Visit as many events at other sites as you can as one of the general public. Look at the reenactors they host. Look at their displays, their demos, and how they interact with the public. Some questions to consider:

Are the reenactors eager to engage with the public?

1. Are they:

- Polite?
- Inviting?
- Knowledgeable?
- Friendly?
- Engaging?
- Safe?
- Tolerant of “stupid” questions with obvious answers? (While questions like “are you hot in those clothes” and “is that a real fire” are legendary in reenactor circles, one of the most common questions I get doing War of 1812 reenactment is “When was the war of 1812?”)

2. Do they mainly give the same lecture over and over again or do they let the public ask questions and explore their area?

3. Do they constantly seek to improve their impressions and their knowledge of their time period?

How does their camp/demo area look?

1. Does it have enough people to both talk to the public as well as watch the hands-off items like weapons and the fire?
2. Do they keep modern items out of sight and covered, away from the public?
3. Are people actively engaged in doing something in camp related to their impression like working on a craft or trade, cleaning their weapons, cooking, tidying up, etc.?
4. Is their site neat and orderly?
5. Is there a safe area for the public to easily engage with the reenactors away from things like the weapons and the cooking fire?

- Are hands-on items and non-hands-on items clearly marked and separated for the public?

Do the reenactors keep modern/off-topic conversation out of their camp areas and limit them to “off-site” areas like the bathrooms or break areas and after public hours?

If you don't like a unit or if you don't get a good impression from them, then find other reenactors. If you can visit the same unit at a few different events, that is a good idea as everyone has a bad event from time to time. Good reenactors will always try to improve and do better.

Talk to other sites about the units they host and get recommendations as well. The more popular time periods will have more choices and some groups will come up again and again, for one reason or another. The good reenactors will have good reputations and vice-versa. Be wary of reenactors who have been disinvited or outright banned from sites and/or units. They are probably not good choices for your event.

Absolutely do not tolerate any reenactors who are outright racist, sexist, bigoted, outspoken about modern politics while the public is around, or who are just jerks, no matter how good their impression is and how much stuff they have in their camp. It's better to have a smaller group of good, dedicated reenactors who engage your visitors and with whom you don't have to worry about doing damage control with the press, than a reenactor who has the best collection and uniforms but who is unpleasant or even offensive to be around. Your event is about interpreting history and education, not pushing a personal agenda.

Once you have visited other events and gotten to know the local reenactors, you can talk to them about ideas you have for your event and start the planning process. This will be continued in part 2 of this article.

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Gallery Image



FIG 1. 1940S CAV - WWII AMERICAN CAVALRY. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 2. FRENCH-RESISTANCE-MILITARY-VEHICLES- A FRENCH RESISTANCE REENACTOR WITH A SELECTION OF MILITARY VEHICLES BEHIND HIM. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 3. LAND-GIRLS-CHICKENS- A LAND GIRL AND A BRITISH TOMMY CONTEMPLATE THE INVASION OF CHICKENS INTO THE LAND GIRLS CAMP. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 4. MOROCCAN-SCW- A MOROCCAN REGULAR FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 5. MTA-2017 - REENACTORS SIT AROUND A FIRE AFTER HOURS AT A TIMELINE EVENT. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT - A NATIVE AMERICAN REENACTOR PORTRAYS AN 1870S PLAINS INDIAN, A MEMBER OF THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, AND AN UNION OFFICER FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 6. ROMAN-HANDS-ON2 - A VARIETY OF HANDS ON ITEMS FOR A DOMESTIC ANCIENT ROMAN DISPLAY.
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FIG 7. ROMAN-HANDS-ON3 - A GIRL TRIES HER HAND AT WRITING ON A WAX TABLET AT AN ANCIENT ROMAN CAMP.
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FIG 8. SCW-FIELD-DEMO- THE TOM MOONEY MACHINE GUN BATTALION FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR DOES A FIELD TACTICAL DEMONSTRATION. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER



FIG 9. SCW-KIDDIE-DEMO-SPANISH CIVIL WAR REENACTORS TEACH KIDS HOW TO DRILL LIKE THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES. COPYRIGHT: DEB FULLER