

Executive Summary

Introduction

I interned at the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg during the fall of 2004. The National Civil War Museum is a nonprofit company that works to promote an unbiased display of the Civil War through authentic artifacts, wall panels, and video/audio technology. The curatorial and archival departments work together alongside the executive offices to make the museum intriguing for the masses. The museum constantly changes their temporary exhibit, which features unique aspects of the Civil War. Currently, an exhibit about children during the Civil War is on display.

I developed four learning objectives to help me enhance my museum internship experience and compiled multiple resources to help verify these objectives. These objectives ranged from learning how to clean and handle artifacts to ensure preservation to helping with artifact arrangement in the display cases throughout the children's exhibit. My other learning objectives involved transcribing original nineteenth century documents, and I created a donation program to better thank people for their artifact donations to the museum.

Work/Projects

Each of my learning objectives surrounded specific projects with the exception of learning to clean and manage artifacts. During the three weeks of preparation for the children's exhibit, my time was spent tearing down the previous temporary exhibit, scanning original photographs for the display panels, stuffing mannequins to get them ready for authentic children's clothing, and arranging artifacts in the display cases.

I also worked with all of the Chamberlain documents in the museum archives. Most of them were disorganized, so my time with the letters has been spent organizing them and making sure that they are all stored properly. With the little time I had left after the children's exhibit opened, I worked on transcribing letters written to Chamberlain from his wife, Fannie, and letters Chamberlain wrote to her during the war.

The donation program has yet to take flight. I drafted a letter that is to be sent to donors while they are waiting to receive their “Deed of Gift” that finalizes the donation. I also designed a certificate that the donors will receive in appreciation for their generous gift to the museum.

Learning

Coming into this internship, I had nothing but a passion for history and a desire to learn about how to get a job at a museum. In the process, I have learned about how to design and literally set up a museum exhibit and all of the outside resources that are involved. I learned about how to care for artifacts, and the importance of their preservation. The skills I have acquired as a result of my internship involve finding a target audience for an exhibit, and making sure that the audience coincides with that of the entire museum. Museums that struggle internally will also struggle externally.

Future Plans

While working at the museum, I hesitantly concluded to go to graduate school immediately after college to get a master’s degree in public history because most museums require their curators to have at least a master’s degree. Based on my performance at the museum, however, my internship supervisor and the human resources department are in the process of offering me a job in the curatorial department as the Registrar of Collections. My only apprehension about this position is that if I would ever choose to leave Harrisburg, I will still be unqualified for a curatorial position without a master’s degree.

Preparation/Recommendation

I felt adequately prepared with the knowledge of the Civil War that the museum required. This came from an upper division history class called Civil War America. I would recommend at least one upper division class that focuses on the specific area of history on which the student’s internship is based; a broad understanding of social and objective history is essential.