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Negotiating the Nancy Boy: Representation in Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star"

By Stephen Harrick

Abstract

Conner Prairie, a living history site in Indiana, presents the past by offering "Follow the North Star," a traveling program in which visitors embody escaped slaves in the United States during 1836. The costumed interpreters often refer to the genders of the visitors, calling the women "breeders," the men "bucks" and sometimes "nancy boys," suggesting a sexual deviance or inferiority. Employing "nancy boy" instead of racialized terms changes what visitors may expect from such a racially-charged situation. Further, it effectively rewrites history by cleaning up the violent racism associated with slavery. Staging a slave program while employing rhetoric denoting sexuality may offer the visitor a visceral experience that points to a feeling of inferiority that the historical figures might have felt, but in the process falls short of presenting the past in an accurate way. This is further complicated when considering that the visitors to the site must pay to participate in the program and are subsequently herded from one location to the next for approximately 90 minutes, leading the visitor to negotiate U.S. history phenomenologically in a way that the written word does not allow.

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We move our way along a dirt path, through the wooded area in the chilly darkness. Thus far this evening, we have been inspected and sold in an illegal slave sale, forced to perform manual labor, and threatened at gunpoint. We escape our captors and come across a group of women who, though not entirely friendly, are willing to help us by describing which houses to seek out. Once we come upon such a house, the Quakers who inhabit it invite us inside, offering food and advice. We warm up and they give us guidance to stay safe under such brutal conditions, away from those who seek to do us harm. As I take in this advice, I wonder to myself, "What could they be preparing us for that hasn't already happened tonight?"

Experiences such as the one recounted above are gaining in visibility at living history museums at the beginning of the 21st century. Though not always as physically demanding as the anecdote above, programming at living history sites offers the visitor a more active role in the embodiment and, thus, the interpretation of history. One of the leaders amongst living history sites to offer this type of programming is Conner Prairie. Just north of Indianapolis, Conner Prairie presents itself as "the nation's most innovative outdoor history attraction" ("Explore and Discover").[1] Indeed, Conner Prairie, which includes both outdoor and

[1] Conner Prairie seems to have undergone an identity transformation. In a brochure titled "Fall 2008 Events," Conner Prairie is described as "a non-profit living history museum." In its "2009 Special Events" brochure, however, it is dubbed an "interactive history park." For this paper, I refer to Conner Prairie as a living history museum, since I first encountered "Follow the North Star" when the museum identified as one.

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indoor programming and exhibitions, stages a variety of events, both in content and time period: a Lenape Indian Camp, the 1836 village Prairietown, an 1859 balloon voyage, an 1863 Civil War program. The variety in Conner Prairie's offerings gives space within which multiple, diverse voices tell their stories.

One of the more visceral programs that Conner Prairie offers is the aforementioned "Follow the North Star," an event offered every spring and autumn. Museum visitors portray fugitive slaves on the run in Indiana in 1836, and in so doing endeavor to "step into the shoes of a fugitive slave attempting to escape a life of captivity" ("Fall Events 2008"). As the visitors take on the roles of unnamed slaves, the costumed staff members embody multiple roles, such as white people trying to sell the escaped slaves, free African-Americans helping the slaves, and white people who want to usher the slaves off their land so as not to appear to be helping them. In "Follow the North Star," the visitors (or second-person interpreters) have the opportunity to engage in a performance historiography, and are thus enacting and, if unintentionally, revising history.[2] This unconventional program allows its visitors a lived history that emphasizes the senses, emotions, and feelings that may have washed over those who experienced such events. In enabling visitors to participate in the programming directly, the temporary historical interpreters shape and embody history in unique ways.

Living history programs such as "Follow the North Star" serve as opportunities to examine traditional narratives privileging histories that

[2] I use the terms "first-person," "second-person," and "third-person" interpreters, as well as non-costumed staff. First-person interpreters are employees or volunteers of a living history museum who dress in period costumes and employ first-person pronouns (I/me). Third-person interpreters are costumed and refer to the figures they are embodying in the third-person (he/she/they). Second-person interpreters are the tourists dressed in modern garb. Finally, non-costumed staff members are those who work or volunteer at living history sites and wear modern attire.

are perhaps easier to deal with (i.e. those histories that do not explicitly address race, gender, or class). To be sure, living history is useful as a mode of interrogation and inquiry, and "Follow the North Star" allows for more options due to its focus on an illegal slave sale and its active inclusion of visitors to participate in the event. Followed by a brief overview of post-tourism, the lens through which I consider second-person interpretation, I offer a description of my experiences with "Follow the North Star," drawing on both my observations as a participant, as well as published accounts. I then examine the program as a way of interpreting the past without attempting to portray it authentically. Those who engage in post-tourism portray a spirit or essence of the event while acknowledging that they are not representing history in a wholly accurate manner. In so doing, I argue that this stimulating phenomenon, while imperfect, gives its tourists a complex, if contradictory, encounter with a recreated American history and heritage, particularly those historical figures who struggled with real challenges throughout their lives, thereby illuminating historically intricate challenges for those who lived in the past.

Traditionally, living history museums have limited the actions that visitors are allowed to carry out in an historical context. Second-person interpretation at many outdoor museums has often been little more than the costumed interpreters allowing visitors to briefly engage in "routine activities," such as "churning butter" ("This is a Drama" 19). Carrying out tasks such as churning butter may prove interesting and reveal some basic challenges in creating a seemingly simple food item; nonetheless, performing such chores does not give the visitor a thorough sense of enacting or embodying the past, even if the elements involved are all historically accurate. Conner Prairie, conversely, offers second-person living history experiences that give its visitors more agency, such as tanning deer hide or forking hay (Webster 66). While these may also be

seen as routine chores, they allow for more active participation from the visitors. The second-person interpreters not only engage in an experience akin to, but not necessarily the same as, those living in the 19th century; they also observe the history as spectators. The second-person participants, cast in dual roles, are themselves simultaneously writers and tourists of living history. Such visitors typify post-tourism.

The term post-tourism comes from Maxine Feifer, who looks at how tourists playfully consume the sites/sights that they visit:

> His [the post-tourist's] eye, as he traverses a landscape or a cityscape, can pick up the classic beauty and Romantic uniqueness of natural forms, and on the geometric complexities and even the jazzlike discordances of industrial forms and decompositions: there is a variety of aesthetic contexts available. He has a humorous eye for 'kitsch,' as well. (270)

The post-tourist approaches attractions with a simultaneous sense of emotional detachment and genuine interest in the subject. John Urry echoes Feifer when he describes the post-tourist as "self-conscious, 'cool' and role-distanced" (92). The post-tourist occasionally seeks out manufactured or artificial experiences for the enjoyment of such artificiality. This is not to suggest that the post-tourist will always enjoy an experience based on its level of kitsch. Rather, post-tourists are flexible and open to nontraditional touristic encounters. In some ways, all tourists have the capacity for post-tourism, and may engage with sites or museums as traditional tourists, as well as in post-touristic ways.

Necessarily, post-tourism has its limitations. Not every individual will consider herself a post-tourist. While some individuals may bring with them an element of kitsch or awareness to a living history museum like Conner Prairie, some interpret the historical performances as authentic and true to life. In 1999, National Public Radio's program *This American*

Life devoted a section of an episode to scrutinizing “Follow the North Star.” Narrator Alix Spiegel went on “Follow the North Star” and recorded her experiences, as well as interviews with some of the visitors before, during, and after the program. Spiegel recounts a moment when, after the white costumed interpreters “buy” the visitors in an illegal sale (Indiana in 1836 was a free state), the slave owners force the visitors to perform the menial task of moving wood from one pile to another. Spiegel observes that she and the other visitors were downtrodden. “We’re broken. It’s taken fifteen minutes” (“What’s So Funny…”). Spiegel’s description does not include an element of kitsch or awareness of the simulated nature of the program. Instead, she keys into an authentic emotional response and thus speaks to a lack of recognition of post-tourism. Later in the episode, as the group of visitors were walking from one location to another, Spiegel asks a group of teenage girls how they were handling the situation. One proclaimed that “this is how it was. This is how it was in real life” (“What’s So Funny…”). This claim is in direct conflict with the premise of post-tourism. Clearly, some of the visitors who encounter “Follow the North Star” do not typify post-tourism. Instead, they reflect Dean McCannell’s observation that “[s]ightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives” (94).

McCannell’s approach is no less valid than that of the post-tourist. That said, Spiegel’s description of the living history program suggests that post-touristic attitudes may thrive, or have the potential to, in “Follow the North Star.” Later in the radio program, after narrowly escaping a white man carrying a gun, Spiegel found herself “giggling uncontrollably,” and remarking that any pretense about being transported to another time “has completely evaporated” (“What’s So Funny…”). Spiegel’s description is post-touristic, acknowledging the historical and geographic significance while simultaneously enjoying the experience related to it, whether in a

critical or playful approach. As Urry argues, "the post-tourist knows that he or she is a tourist and that tourism is a series of games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience" (91). Post-tourists, then, negotiate their situations, which is not only important, but necessary. Such an approach is particularly useful for Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star."

EXPERIENCING "FOLLOW THE NORTH STAR"

"Follow the North Star" is structured like a journey for the visitors, as staff members and volunteers lead the guests around the grounds of Conner Prairie throughout the evening. The program began with the visitors waiting in a lobby area for a staff member to take them to the location of the program. The visitors, who presumably did not know each other unless they were a part of a group, eventually met a museum staff member, who entered the lobby and then led the group into a lecture hall to prepare the visitors for the program.[3] In the lecture hall, staff members clarified that the costumed interpreters would be treating us as fugitive slaves on the run in 1836 and that we should behave accordingly. Following this, a staff member took the group outside into the night. As I moved further away from the museum building, part of me felt as if I was leaving the 21st century behind and moving into the 19th century. The staff member taking us to the outdoor program reminded us of our circumstances as we entered a dark, wooded area. At this point, I was prepared for an experience in which the costumed interpreters would treat me as an enslaved person of color. Once we approached a remote area, the staff member repeated that we would be treated as African-

[3] I have participated in "Follow the North Star" several times. Typically, there are approximately fifteen participating visitors, though this is a dubious approximation. One or two of these participants are usually "plants," volunteers or employees who participate undercover. According to one Conner Prairie representative, the plants are there "so no one gets lost."

American slaves and told us to wait for the costumed interpreters, leaving us there alone in the dark woods. This reiterated the attitudes that I would encounter during the program. Even though the staff members prepped me for abrasive treatment, I was not ready when I was first yelled at by costumed interpreters.

Suddenly a gun fired and a voice told us to get into one line so that people could inspect us before selling us in an illegal slave sale. The people bossing us around (mostly male, all white costumed interpreters) told the visitors to stand in two lines, made up of males ("bucks") and females ("breeders"). The costumed interpreters, whom I understood to be white slave owners, inspected the visitors and asked them questions regarding their skill sets. During one visit I responded by saying that "I can do what you need me to do," thinking that this would appease the interpreter. He then asked me if I would be willing to wear a petticoat and go into town. Not wanting to disappoint, I responded in the affirmative. He removed me from the line and forced me to hug a tree. Further, I was labeled a "nancy boy" for agreeing to don a petticoat. Another male visitor was already hugging the tree, and we hugged the tree together, us two nancy boys.

Image Used with Permission of Conner Prairie

I argue that the label "nancy boy," connoting homosexuality (or, at least, implying a lack of masculinity), inverts what a 21st century visitor may have been expecting from such an historically racially-charged situation. During my first visit, the term "nancy boy" took the place of any racial signifiers the costumed interpreters might have made, and the transfer of terms was jarring. "Nancy boy" is sharply contrasted to Scott Magelssen's description of the same program when he took part in it during April 2004. Magelssen writes that he and his group "were repeatedly forced to [their] knees by slave drivers and called 'monkeys' and other slurs" ("This is a Drama" 19-20). By 2008, my first experience with "Follow the North Star," the signifiers of race were not abundant in "Follow the North Star."[4] Instead of employing the term "monkeys," no doubt a term that challenges visitors to consider the racist implications that come with such a moniker, the costumed staff employed a different rhetoric, to effective ends. Carl R. Weinberg also writes about being called a nancy boy during "Follow the North Star:"

> 'What kind of work have you done, boy?' he asks. I say nothing, embarrassed that I have no identifiable trade, no definite skill like blacksmithing. 'I don't know nothing about no irons,' I stammer. He pauses, then asks, menacingly, 'Are you a nancy boy?' 'No, sir,' I answer. 'Are you a nancy boy?' he asks again. 'No, sir,' I repeat. 'Get over there with those breeders!' he commands. I comply and move from the line of 'bucks' to join the 'breeders.' 'Now, hold up your arms and say, 'I'm a nancy boy.' I lift my arms up and say, weakly, 'I'm a nancy boy.' 'Say it louder,' he orders. 'I'm a nancy boy,' I yell in response. (62)

[4] In the interest of full disclosure, I admit that Scott Magelssen accompanied me, along with several other colleagues, on Conner Prairie's "Follow the North Star" program during my first visit in April 2008. My subsequent experiences with "Follow the North Star," however, were not with Magelssen.

Weinberg's shame is not so discernibly different from my own. The Conner Prairie staff specifically changed the signifier from one denoting racial inferiority to another, suggesting sexual abjection.[5] A possible reason for this switch is that, even though the visitors are enacting fugitive slaves, they probably do not actually relate to or feel like escaped African-Americans in 1836, at least not so early in the program. Another possible reason is that some visitors (or staff members) found the term "monkeys" objectionable, and "nancy boy" may, on the surface, seem less objectionable, though it should not be. Indeed, David Allison, a former employee at Conner Prairie,[6] explained to me that the staff members determine what might be too far for some visitors, "It's always negotiating a fine line between what is considered perhaps too much for modern audiences to handle." Allison continues: Conner Prairie staff members "also have to recognize that we need to be as close as possible to the historic record at the same time." The Conner Prairie staff must consider what is appropriate and effective to contemporary visitors while presenting history in a way that resembles what is known about the time period. Negotiating two important elements that may, at times, be at odds with each other must be challenging. Stephen J. Cox explains how Conner Prairie initially dealt with this negotiation regarding the absence of the more inflammatory signifier "nigger." A former Conner Prairie employee, Cox explains that the museum formed an advisory board comprised of African-American educators and museum professionals, as well as Conner Prairie staff: "After some discussion, the advisory board approved 'bucks' and 'breeders' as the slave traders' language for the men and women they were buying and selling, but agreed with Conner Prairie. Either way,

[5] Surprisingly, the term "nancy boy" does not date back to 1836, when "Follow the North Star" is meant to occur. *The Oxford English Dictionary*'s website lists the first usage of the term in 1927, long after "Follow the North Star" occurs.

[6] When I spoke with David Allison, he was the General Manager for Experience Delivery at Conner Prairie.

'nigger' or other disparaging labels would not be used" (484). The exclusion of words such as "nigger" follows this shift from one strong signifier about race to another about sexual inferiority. The use of such a signifier, based on my own experiences as well as those of Weinberg, suggests that "nancy boy" effectively works to garner a visceral response from a large demographic. The "nancy boy" signifier worked to shake up the visitors and force them to feel, if only momentarily, subordinate and inferior.[7]

This blurring of lines continued throughout the program. During one visit, a costumed interpreter asked a female visitor how many children she had. When the visitor responded by saying that she could not have children, the costumed interpreter removed her from the breeder line and placed her in the buck line. Further, the second male participant who had been identified as a "nancy boy" was subsequently taken out of the buck line and placed in the breeder line. This distorting of male/female categories functioned to further shake up my expectations. Instead of referring to her as an African-American, the costumed interpreter dealt with her solely in terms implying femininity or, rather, a lack of femininity due to her infertility. The female visitor's comment exemplifies Judith Butler's argument that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (519). The temporal constituting of one's gender is not simply tenuous; it changes meaning when transposed onto another time, such as the comparisons between 1836 and the 21st century. The female visitor's resistance was palpable, and the costumed interpreter's reaction extreme. Further, the second-person interpreter who claimed that she could not have children may have been telling the truth, but more likely she took a

[7] The term "nancy boy" may not be historically accurate or appropriate for "Follow the North Star," but the term elicited, for me, a visceral reaction. I have never heard the term "monkey" during the program, but I have heard costumed interpreters say "darky," "darky face," and, confusingly, "savages."

post-touristic approach to the event, thereby interpreting history on her terms. The role of the post-tourist participant, then, is fluid and flexible.

The rest of "Follow the North Star" was equally visceral. I traveled through rough terrain in the dark, unsure of where I was. I encountered several costumed interpreters, some of whom were willing to help me escape to freedom, either because they wanted to see me remain free or simply because they did not want to be seen harboring escaped slaves. The white costumed interpreters who bought us put us to work by moving the wood that Spiegel described. The first-person interpreters yelled at the visitors, telling them to move the wood faster. On one visit, a costumed interpreter removed a visitor from the work area and told him to stand in the middle of the dirt road next to where we worked. He then forced the visitor to dance for the white costumed interpreters. This racialized treatment of the visitor stood out as one of few references to our presumed blackness during the program. Making the visitor dance for the white men, recalling slaves dancing for their masters on the plantation—and, in turn, American blackface minstrelsy—the first-person interpreters treated the visitors as African-American slaves during the 19th century, albeit in an exceedingly gentle way.

Not all of the costumed interpreters, however, treated the visitors with such hostility. One noteworthy encounter involved an African-American costumed interpreter who hoped to buy his wife from her "master" so that they may both live free. He was one of few African-American interpreters in "Follow the North Star" who spoke about the effects of slavery in a personal way. He suggested that we find a household of Quakers who were willing to help. Upon arriving at the house occupied by Quakers, they took us in. Some costumed interpreters apparently saw us enter the home and banged on the doors loudly, shouting that they had seen some African-Americans enter the home. Eventually the men went in another direction in search of the escaped slaves, and we were momentarily safe. Obviously, I was never in any real danger, but the shouting and banging on the doors (I was sitting up against the door and felt the intense vibrations from his banging) made for a startling few moments. This experience was similar to the others, and precisely planned, creating dramatic tension. I was simultaneously made to feel discomfort for my safety, yet was equally aware that I was completely safe.[8] This is part of the manipulation of living history: the second-person

Image Used with Permission of Conner Prairie

[8] Magelssen has also explicated that, when second-person interpreters experience conflict "it is for the purposes of dramatic tension and spun in terms of building American character" ("Making History" 301).

interpreters are never in danger, as long as they go exactly where the staff members lead them to go. Magelssen astutely observes that "the autonomy of the visitor's body is questionable, since it performs and voices the history of the institution" (*Simming* 35). Throughout the "Follow the North Star" tours that I took, myself and the other visitors played the roles that Conner Prairie expected us to play; when we spoke for ourselves (claiming that I could do whatever the costumed interpreters needed, a female visitor declaring she could not have children) and when the staff members exerted complete control over our bodies in order to shape the narratives that they preferred.

Based on this evidence, Conner Prairie's strategies may be visceral, but do not stage the historical record with complete precision. By endorsing such visions of history, the staff members of Connor Prairie make these historiographic practices acceptable, though problematic when considered for historical accuracy. The histories that Conner Prairie stages in "Follow the North Star" become a series of representational practices meant not to replicate behavior in Indiana in 1836, but instead to mirror modern versions of somewhat similar actions. By employing rhetoric such as "nancy boy" as a presumptive substitute for "monkey," Conner Prairie valorizes substitution for historic reenactments, making the history it presents inaccurate, though emotionally disturbing and jarring.

INTERPRETING SECOND-PERSON HISTORY

Conner Prairie strategically employs 21st century rhetoric instead of historically accurate 19th century speech in order to inculcate the post-touristic frame of mind. Even so, one may read the program in multiple ways that differ from the ways in which I do. As such, I consider other ways of interpreting "Follow the North Star," which overlap in some respects. Before analyzing different readings, however, it is important to

examine how “Follow the North Star” is marketed by the Conner Prairie staff. By considering the publicity and marketing, one may reasonably determine what the employees at Conner Prairie hope to achieve with the program. In considering the representational practices that the staff members employ, one may conclude that they received too many complaints about the use of racially charged rhetoric, or the staff members considered that language too aggressive. The above descriptions by Allison and Cox are decidedly tricky. The use of such a charged term as “nancy boy” may evoke a potentially comparative reaction from the visitors as African-Americans living in the 19th century who were called racial slurs such as “monkeys” or other racist language. I argue, however, that the change to “nancy boy” is meant, in part, to perpetuate or contain an idealized notion of masculinity, which serves to make visitors, at the very least this visitor, feel inferior.

Substituting a sexual or gender signifier for a racial one relates to the outward appearance of the visitors. As Butler argues, “‘the’ body is invariably transformed into his body or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance” (523). I would find it difficult to believe that the costumed interpreters were confused by the physical gendered appearances of the visitors. In any case, this possible explanation falls short. The scant usage of racially charged slurs is noticeable and is clearly not an oversight. That said, the substitution of other slurs or markers linked to sexual abjection or otherness creates a new set of problems, one that some visitors were unprepared to negotiate. As I mention above, the Conner Prairie staff prepared us to “step into the shoes of a fugitive slave escaping a life of captivity” before we encountered any first-person interpreter, and instead the costumed staff referred to us in terms suggesting sexuality. Most of the references to our assumed racial

identities, surprisingly, came from the non-costumed staff instead of the costumed interpreters.

After the living history portion of the program ended, staff members led us into a room inside the building for a debriefing session. This meeting is designed, no doubt, to not only unpack the evening's events, but also to avoid any trauma or prolonged discomfort, as well as offer feedback on how the program works and where it falls short. A staff member led the discussion focusing on what the individual group members experienced and our thoughts about the program. During one debriefing, a staff member admitted that Conner Prairie's treatment of its visitors was "mild" in comparison historical treatment of slaves. "Mild" may describe how the costumed interpreters treated the visitors, but, in contrast, the museum granted us opportunities to resist the traditional narratives that drive much of the living history museum's programming, particularly with the content of slavery and the option of allowing visitors to become historical interpreters. The group described the program as "intense." The intensity of the program is palpable, as the costumed interpreters imposed upon us different bodies from those which we were anticipating, and this, in turn, disrupted our expectations. I do not know how often the costumed interpreters used terminology such as "nancy boy," nor on which participants, but the disruption of identity signifiers has happened to multiple visitors, so it cannot simply be a random coincidence. This disruption led to an experience that offered the post-tourist an essence of what history might have resembled, since the term "nancy boy" gave the feeling of inferiority.

CONCLUSION

Conner Prairie may provide an imperfect rendering of an Indiana in 1836 by referring to some of the second-person interpreters as "nancy

boys" throughout "Follow the North Star," but the end–forcing the visitors to move beyond their comfort zones–justifies the means. By enacting African-American slaves on the run, I and the other participants were not entirely prepared to experience the constant walking around in darkness, the dehumanizing tasks that some of the costumed interpreters forced us to perform, and the excessive hatred and resentment from most white historical figures. I recognize the limitations in employing contemporary rhetoric in order to demean and belittle the second-person interpreters at living history museums today; however, I do not mean to belie the power of second-person interpretation in general. With "Follow the North Star," second-person interpretation offers events that will affect visitors in ways different from seeing costumed interpreters carry out tasks. By offering historical experiences that allow the visitor to participate in interpreting and embodying, living history museums will continue to gain legitimacy as purveyors of historiographic and touristic performances.

"Follow the North Star" offers a compelling, if limited and incomplete, version of history for its visitors, thereby allowing them to temporarily embody history. Conner Prairie's second-person interpretation programs contribute to that process of allowing the visitor's involvement in the staging of history. Some of these limitations may reside within visitors whose post-touristic attitudes allow them to view historic sites merely as kitsch, but, as Feifer points out, "the post-tourist knows that he is a tourist: not a time traveler when he goes somewhere historic" (271). While it seems clear that most tourists do not believe they are literally travelling to another time period, some visitors accept the pretense of touristic encounters, evidenced by the teenager who told Spiegel that "Follow the North Star" was genuine to the lived experiences of slaves. Second-person interpretation provides an element of flexibility with which to experience living history, as well as an understanding that

the site serves to communicate to contemporary visitors. To be sure, "Follow the North Star" offers phenomenological historical encounters that first- and third-person experiences cannot. My experiences on "Follow the North Star" wrote the historical record on my body in a way that the written word did not. Second-person interpretation gives historical experiences that are often not made available to the visitor. Conner Prairie's staging of the past through its second-person programming offers more opportunities for visitors to experience hints of the past, albeit briefly, in a relatively safe and controlled environment.

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