

# Where are blacks, women? Living history museums rethink past

August 29 2018, by Mark Pratt

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In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, Ellen Watterson reenacts an 1830s farm worker milking a cow named May in a barn at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

A Massachusetts living history museum that depicts life in the early 19th

century is looking to overhaul the way it presents the past in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience.

Old Sturbridge Village has received a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities it will use to partner with scholars and other consultants for a multiyear study into how it portrays four areas: agriculture and food, civics, industry and economy, and race and gender.

It's a modest grant, but it could have a major impact.

"What this grant will allow us to do is look at the entire picture and really dive deep into making sure that it's a cohesive, purposeful experience for the visitor as they progress through the museum," said Rhys Simmons, Old Sturbridge Village's director of interpretation.

The reboot, the museum's first in about 40 years, is sorely needed, Simmons said. Old Sturbridge Village hasn't updated its staff training material since the 1970s, and visitor experience surveys have found that people, while generally positive about their visit, feel something is missing.

Many museums are dealing with similar issues, said Jeff Hardwick, deputy director of the National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Public Programs.



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, reenactors in the roles of 1830s farm workers carry milk buckets and pitchers in a barn at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

According to a 2016 report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Indicators project, visits to historic sites have been on the decline since 1982.

"Many historic site interpretations have lagged behind scholarship, so they have to become more relevant to a more diverse audience," Hardwick said.

Old Sturbridge Village, on 200 acres (81 hectares) in central Massachusetts, depicts life in a small New England town of the 1830s, with 40 to 50 employees dressed in period clothing going about daily routines in the home, workshops or farm and interacting with visitors. It gets about 250,000 visitors a year.



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, Lorelei Arndt, right, sits behind a farmhouse window as she reenacts an 1830s farm worker at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

The early 19th century was a time of social upheaval, and the role of



minorities and women was changing. Slavery no longer existed in most of New England, and the abolitionist and temperance movements were in full swing.

Yet the [museum](#) hasn't done a good enough job of presenting those stories, Simmons said.

"We underrepresent the African-American and the Native American story dramatically," Simmons said. "You leave here with the sense that it was an almost exclusively white- and male-dominated picture of what life was like."



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, a horse-drawn wagon makes its way past a building at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of

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(AP Photo/Steven Senne)

The role of women also needs to be re-examined, he said. While men held jobs in the fields, or in workshops, women held the household together.

"The home was the foundation of every family so women played probably the most important role in rural New England life," Simmons said. "Men couldn't manage without women."

People have more options for their leisure time and money now than they did 20 years ago, and museums need to figure out how to better compete for that time and money, said Lauren McCormack, secretary of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums . The Old Sturbridge Village study may help.

"Anything they learn at Old Sturbridge Village hopefully would be shared throughout the field and be applicable to some extent at other museums," said McCormack, executive director of the Marblehead Museum in Massachusetts.



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, a child walks away from an entrance to a blacksmith shop at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, Derek Heidemann reenacts an 1830s blacksmith at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)





In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, Jadon Rivard, center, reenacts an 1830s farm worker as children explore a barn at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, Hannah Ingersoll, left, and Lorelei Arndt, second from left, reenact 1830s farm workers as children look on in a cheese room at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)



In this Wednesday, Aug. 22, 2018, photo, reenactor Claire Gregoire knits a mitten using hand-spun yarn at Old Sturbridge Village, in Sturbridge, Mass. With a \$75,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Old Sturbridge Village, a living history museum that depicts life in a small New England town in the 1830s, is taking a deep look at the way it presents the past, including the roles of minorities and women, in an effort to stay relevant to a 21st century audience. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

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