Roundtable Review


**Introduction**

**J. L. Anderson**

**Once upon a time, the Agricultural History Society (AHS) had a sustained interest in public history.** In 1921, just two years after the society organized, the leadership struck a committee on agricultural history museums, recommending that the AHS encourage or assist in creating a national agricultural museum in Washington, DC. Russell H. Anderson used his 1939 presidential address to renew the call for the creation of a national agricultural center and museum. A few years later, at the behest of president James Malin, Everett E. Edwards articulated goals for the society’s second twenty-five years. Edwards echoed Anderson’s call for such a museum as well as the development of regional museums of agriculture that included living history interpretation. Then in 1965, Marion Clawson urged the establishment of a system of as many as fifty living historical farms across the country to tell the story of change and diversity in American agriculture. At a gathering of historians and museum curators held at Old Sturbridge Village in 1970, AHS members John Schlebecker and Wayne Rasmussen helped create the Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums, later rechristened the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM).1

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After the birth of ALHFAM, there was less demand within AHS for a museum of agriculture. A florescence of living history museums dedicated to rural life began in the 1960s, easing the pressure for the organization to build a national museum and dampening interest in public history as part of the organizational culture. With Schlebecker and Pete Daniel at the Smithsonian, the AHS attained a prominent place in shaping public history without a national agricultural museum. In the decades since 1970, the organization focused more on the academy than on the community.

The fact that the AHS no longer articulates public history goals does not mean that members do not care about it. Many society members teach public history, consult, and are otherwise active in the field. To the extent that the AHS engages public historians, much of the credit goes to Debra Reid, currently the Curator of Agriculture and Environment at The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation. In addition to authoring a scholarly monograph, numerous journal articles, and several edited collections, Reid has published dozens of essays in public history and museum studies. For eighteen years, Reid trained museum professionals in Eastern Illinois University’s graduate program in Historical Administration. She served as board member and president of ALHFAM and continues to play a leadership role in the Midwest Open-Air Museums Coordinating Council. Reid is currently an officer of the Association Internationale Des Musées D’Agriculture, an organizational affiliate of the International Council of Museums. In short, Reid is eminently qualified to teach about interpreting rural people and places, the tools of work and leisure, and crops and livestock.

Reid’s *Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites* is a recognition of the changing place of agriculture in American life and its place at museums. In contrast to the America of Malin, Edwards, and Gladys Baker’s day, new generations of museum visitors and staff have low agricultural literacy. If the past is a foreign country, as David Lowenthal asserted, the rural past is surely a distinct and little understood subregion, even as farm artifacts, structures, and landscapes promise to teach us a great deal about who we were and how we arrived at today.

Rowman & Littlefield’s “Interpreting History” series, published for the American Association for State and Local History, provides organizations with the tools to revisit their collections and programs to tell stories consistent with recent scholarship. The fourteen titles in the growing series cover subjects such as food, slavery, anniversaries and milestones, Native American

history, and LGBT history, to name just a few. The series is especially useful to organizations with modest research funds and professional development budgets, or those with staff members who cover many collection and program subjects. One of the publisher’s constraints on Reid’s book was that the author not address living history practice, since a planned volume on living history is forthcoming. But as Julia Brock astutely notes in her comments below, much of Reid’s approach is portable, suitable for living history, traditional exhibits, and even classroom settings.

*Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites* includes seven essays authored solely by Reid, three essays co-authored by Reid, and six contributions from other public historians and scholars (full disclosure: the book includes a chapter excerpted from my previously published work). Throughout the book, Reid emphasizes the importance of understanding context through historical research, targeting readers who wish to bring stories of food, fiber, and environment to the foreground and to demonstrate the relevance of those stories for museum audiences.

In keeping with the AHS’s long-standing interest in public history, then, it is fitting to dedicate space in the journal to a work that promises to connect the scholarship of our members with the museum community. The following contributions by Julia Brock, Nancy Bryk, and Doug Hurt are based on their remarks given at a standing-room-only roundtable session at the 2017 AHS Annual Meeting. I want to thank the contributors as well as the editorial team at *Agricultural History* for making the publication of this roundtable possible.

**Contributors**

**J. L. Anderson** is associate professor of history at Mount Royal University. He taught public history at the University of West Georgia and enjoyed ten years as a practitioner, including seven years as Director of History and Interpretation at Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. He is vice president of the Agricultural History Society and currently serves as board chair for the Heritage Park Society, which operates Canada’s largest living history museum.

**Julia Brock** is assistant professor of history and co-director of the Center for Public History at the University of West Georgia. Her research interests are in the post–Civil War South, and she has published on southern history and public memory, and has curated and contributed to numerous exhibits and digital projects.
Nancy E. Villa Bryk is associate professor in Eastern Michigan University’s Graduate Program in Historic Preservation and leads the Museum Practice concentration there. She was Director of Education at the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum and a curator at The Henry Ford for nearly twenty-five years, where she led building reinterpretations and reinstallations, including the Firestone Farmhouse in Greenfield Village. She has an MBA, an MA in American Culture, a Certificate in Museum Practice, and a BA in history and art history, all from the University of Michigan.

R. Douglas Hurt, professor of history at Purdue University, has published widely in agricultural and rural history as well as in public history. He is the author of *American Farms: Exploring their History* (Krieger, 1996). He was a Smithsonian Fellow and is a past president and fellow of the Agricultural History Society.

Debra A. Reid is Curator of Agriculture and the Environment at The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, located in Dearborn, Michigan. A graduate of the Cooperstown Graduate Program and Texas A&M University, Reid is a past president of the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums. She is emeritus professor of history at Eastern Illinois University and adjunct professor in the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois.
I got my start in public history as a nineteen-year-old at the Atlanta History Center, a twenty-two-acre urban campus that features an 1840s farm and collection of period outbuildings.\(^2\) I was a living history docent, meaning I put on a petticoat and interpreted the antebellum life of a family of slaveholding yeoman farmers—in third person, mercifully—for visitors. When I began, green to the world of public history, I doubted the ability of modern visitors to connect to this slice of southern history and culture, especially one that seemed, perhaps, so quaint.

I could not have been more wrong. Almost every one of the site's adult visitors brought stories and interests that infused the farm and its objects with meaning—from stories of personal history, lifeways, and inherited cooking methods and recipes, to interests as varied as the fiber arts and barnyard animals (we had sheep and chickens). As an inexperienced docent governed by nerves, I was glad for any point of connection and conversation. Looking back, I now recognize the tension within those connections that I did not understand at the time. On the one hand, visitors found resonance in the past; on the other, they found certainty in small mythologies colored by an uncritical nostalgia about “farm life” that erased, for example, the presence of forced labor in this particular past. Had I then had a copy of Debra Reid’s *Interpreting Agriculture* I might have been better equipped to limn this terrain, to affirm visitors’ emotional connections while challenging some of their uncritically accepted knowledge.

Reid, in her guidebook for professionals of historic sites and museums, warns the practitioner to remember and to remind visitors that the “past is a foreign country.” Invoking the famous titular declaration by David Lowenthal, she urges interpreters of agricultural history to not simply massage the fiction that it is possible to know what it was like to live in worlds past, regardless of the fact that history on display continues to have importance for modern life. This guiding principle is especially important for consumers of the agricultural past, who, as Reid points out, can carry certain racialized and gendered notions about farming and farmers into their experience.

Reid’s guidebook is part of Roman & Littlefield’s “Interpreting History” series, which, despite being relatively young, has already produced important guides to subthemes within public history practice. (The only other offering in

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the series close in theme to Reid’s is Michele Moon’s *Interpreting Food*, which seems a natural companion to this volume. The first of its kind in public history literature, this collection fills a need in the field to offer encapsulated guidance. The series serves practitioners as an alternative to the article-as-case-study literature that dominates the dissemination of public history, and it begins to aggregate and abstract those best practices so that they are applicable in multiple contexts.

Reid’s work proceeds in four parts that build upon each other in service to the development of an interpretative strategy. She first introduces key terms and themes, arguing for focus on the “human issues of agriculture,” and she neatly explains the process of historical thinking. The past as a foreign place is only one critical precept of the public history work that Reid translates for the reader-practitioner, who may or may not have training and degrees in history and public history—an important point here. She also introduces historiography—without ever using the word—as well as guidelines on how to conduct local research and frame a smaller narrative within a regional or national story.

Part Two is a primer in research and artifact analysis, and includes examples (by way of republished articles) of building historical interpretation through close research. Part Three homes in on specific themes in agricultural history—the importance of roads and bridges, types of horse transportation, livestock, and modern issues in agriculture. The final section begins with a step-by-step guide to building an interpretive narrative, which draws heavily from the processes prescribed by Freeman Tilden and includes several more case studies of interpretive strategies in public history contexts. This general format—an introduction to content and practice, coupled with case studies—is a common one within the “Interpreting History” series.

Throughout the book, Reid makes the important point that the agricultural past is ubiquitous. History museums and historic sites that do not focus on agriculture might do well to scan their collections for artifacts or oral histories that connect to an agricultural past, or even look for ways to elaborate on the agricultural context of subjects already featured at a site, such as cooking, consumption, and gardening. Reid argues that because agriculture affects all of our lives—even beyond food production—we enrich a site’s interpretive suite only if we engage visitors in conversations about it. She offers innumerable ways to do so: through traditional exhibits, oral history collection, dialogue programs, farm tours, and partnerships with agritourism sites. Reid also created rich accompanying resources for the volume, such as a detailed agricultural

policy timeline, to be found on the website of the Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums—although (a small complaint) it took digging to find the resources on the ALHFAM site, indicating the likelihood that the book was published before the specific site pages were created.4

Reading now as a public historian, I found the best practices outlined here in collections management, material culture analysis, and interpretive planning to be standard, reliable ones. I do want to question the field’s continued reliance on Freeman Tilden, who published a work on interpretation for the National Park Service in 1957.5 His work is critical for our field, but we also have newer interpretive paradigms to draw upon, specifically those based on work in the fields of Visitor Studies and Heritage Studies.6 Nevertheless, the focus on Tilden in Reid’s work is complemented by valuable systematic guides for constructing an agricultural chronology and building a holistic (humanistic, biological, technological) historical framework.

One emerging influence on my own professional guidance, on which I wish to have seen more, involves working with modern-day issues in agriculture, or the legacies of agricultural history that continue to shape our contemporary world. At the Center for Public History, where colleagues and I work within rural contexts of western Georgia, these issues often arise in our community work.7 The issue here extends beyond methodology to a question of the position of the historian in these projects. Our research and public interpretation ultimately harbors the potential to benefit a “side” in modern debates, whether it be in the use of GMOs, bringing awareness to the effects of climate change, or working in areas of land tenure and dispossession. Should we take positions publicly in our work, and if we do so, are we supporting essentialisms that categorically define “good” and “bad” and might mar our efforts in public interpretation and engagement? It would be helpful to hear more about such experiences with positionality in work that, in essence, documents and interprets living struggles or resonant legacies in agricultural contexts.

My final point is to encourage readers in the academic world to consider

this a valuable teaching volume, either within or outside of the public history classroom. Reid offers here a primer in historical thinking, an introduction to broad themes in agricultural history, and an overview of public history methodologies. Used in part or as a whole, the book offers a compact and focused pedagogical tool. I commend Reid for authoring a work that speaks effectively to such different audiences—students, agricultural historians, and public historians.

Museum Work
Nancy E. Villa Bryk

Debra Reid’s *Interpreting Agriculture at Museums and Historic Sites*, part of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) series on interpreting specific issues or content in historic sites, deftly guides practitioners at historical sites and museums to more effectively communicate their agricultural stories. It is a comprehensive guide to interpreting or reinterpreting sites and museums—perhaps the most comprehensive of all the interpretive guides in the AASLH’s portfolio. Indeed, if followed assiduously, Reid’s manual would likely result in new interpretations that connect to modern visitors’ lives and interests in ways that may provoke new understanding.

Reid’s book constantly reminds the reader that interpretation of historic sites, no matter what the focus, must be based on best practice. At every turn, she offers guidance as to how to work toward best practice. Foremost, Reid states that effective interpretation is human-centric and must include consideration of agricultural workers of all kinds, exploring how they reacted to innovation, loss, hardship, and new opportunities. She advises that new interpretation must begin by understanding audience interests because discussions not in the interest or experience of the visitor often fail to connect. Reid strongly encourages the adoption of a thematic approach in interpreting the history of a site, fleshing out the important themes on the local level by using site-specific stories and artifacts, and thus avoiding the tedious litany of facts or the focus on process that plague many historic sites. She offers that first-rate interpretation requires exemplary research, and a large portion of the book discusses research recommendations. Reid notes that material culture analysis (farm equipment, outbuildings, and more), as well as an area’s agriculture-related cultural landscape, may reveal something of the ordinary farm worker, whose experiences and attitudes are often absent from traditional archival sources. Finally, she explains the importance of eschewing historical
presentism and rejecting technological determinism, an important message for readers who may not have encountered these concepts in graduate seminars.

Reid’s target audience is those who work in museums and outdoor sites. My responses to this book reflect my work with small historic sites and my understanding of what they need to feel comfortable tackling reinterpretation. The author is mindful of what a site interpreter may not be familiar with in order to revise interpretation, and she has created a comprehensive, dense guide to assist these professionals. My understanding of this target audience informs my critique. Their work lives are exhausting. For the most part, these sites typically interpret historic farmhouses, outbuildings, roads, and other historic landscapes with minimal staff. Managers train and manage largely part-time staffs who must deliver daily programming, demonstrations of farm and domestic work, school programs, and several annual special events. These staffs are required to generate revenue in catering, gift shops, and other schemes dreamed up by management. The work life of interpreters and managers leaves little time for planning new interpretation (even finding time and money for research and interpretation assessment can be a challenge). Many do not have extensive training in history and may never have undertaken serious analysis of secondary sources or conducted primary research.

While Reid urges sites to consider their audience in creating interpretation, I would encourage Reid to be even more mindful of her audience—site interpreters and managers need a straightforward, strategic, “one-stop-shopping” guide to reinterpretation. Readers may need more information on interpretive terms and fundamentals, items that Reid discusses only briefly. Additionally, I might suggest the notable scholarly articles or book chapters be reduced or eliminated in favor of more case studies of how sites have delivered on best practice. This is what site interpreters, site managers, and students are eager to see: What were the challenges? How uncomfortable were these new endeavors? What did they not anticipate? What primary sources were most revelatory? I spend an inordinate amount of time locating case studies about reinterpretation in order to illuminate how the seemingly intangible can be successfully communicated in a historic site; my students have found these case studies so compelling we have Facetimed with sites about the challenges we read about in the AASLH series.

Reid urges historic sites to base interpretation on themes in the history of agriculture. This strategy connects the site to “big picture” issues that move from the past up to the present with resonance for the modern visitor.
However, in order to connect the site to these important themes, the staff must understand these themes. But they are not clearly included in this book. Instead, Reid recommends reading R. Douglas Hurt’s *American Agriculture: A Brief History*—yet another book for the interpreter to read! (Scholars may scoff at this but interpreters’ time is very constrained). It would have been more effective for these themes to be included in outline form, and, if possible, to show how some sites have synthesized these broad themes through local and regional issues and stories. Including these themes in the book, even if abbreviated, could provoke that “aha!” moment without having to find other works. Without these themes clearly stated, I worry that already beleaguered site interpreters would become frustrated by Reid’s guidance.

Perhaps it is for brevity’s sake, or perhaps Reid assumes the site interpreter knows more than they do, but whatever the reason, the author can be a bit shorthanded in some crucial interpretive issues. For example, Reid acknowledges that a site’s mission must guide reinterpretation, but unfortunately, many historic sites and museums have inadequate mission statements that cannot guide staff in interpretation or program design—or that might send them in the wrong direction. This often poses a challenge for interpretive staff. What does one do when a mission is nonexistent or inadequate? How does a site or museum offer a nuanced view of an issue, perhaps exploring challenges, loss, or trade-offs associated with innovation when the mission statement expressly celebrates “progress”? Will the mission permit the discussion of all kinds of farm workers? I know this seems like opening a can of worms, but I have never once worked with a historic site on interpretation without having a frank assessment of the efficacy of the mission to support new interpretation (and it often includes somewhat painful discussions with management and board members about challenges with the mission). Including a few pages about mission fit and some guidance for discussing mission issues with management may have been a good idea. And perhaps Reid could have included a brief discussion of what an effective mission statement should address and connections to sources that can help sites tackle this issue.

Similarly, Reid is brief in discussing the creation of “goals” for new interpretations. Interpretive goals are important for development, delivery, and assessment of interpretation and are generally of great interest to management. She briefly mentions goals, but it may have been wise to explain the variety of goals that are so important to effective interpretation, including content goals, visitor learning goals, institutional goals, and more. Visitor studies may be of interest to the site, too, at least in terms of evaluation. While this may be too
much to include in this book, Reid could have pointed to other resources or perhaps discuss these goals in an appendix.

A strong thread running through this book is the emphasis on connecting to the audience before new or revised interpretation is in place. Reid’s suggestion to engage with local farmers or 4-H folks is a great one. A few more hints as to how to structure those conversations may be appropriate, too. Artifact analysis also may be a good way to include the community in the work of reinterpretation. Asking farm workers for some assistance in this analysis would be effective, as these folks often have useful observations about repairs, replacements, usability, and can even relate personal stories. One note here: telling the stories of seasonal workers, who are underrepresented in sites and in museums, require special skills and careful consideration. More guidance in this realm, perhaps discussed in a case study, would be most useful. This book does not emphasize the urgency and the responsibility we have to tell the stories of these almost invisible workers.

Reid’s inclusion of articles on roads and bridges is useful for expanding our understanding of the agricultural impact on these community features, and vice versa. Additionally, it is worth reiterating that the farmstead land itself is an incomparable primary source. I do not think that sites always address geographical issues comprehensively, and it is fundamental to research and interpretation to conduct this cultural landscape analysis. First-rate interpretation begins with discussion of the land and its features, and I think some site managers and interpreters may need some assistance in doing this. Happily, Reid incorporates the National Park Service’s Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes to this end. An important part of the site research depends on analysis of the site itself, and I would have liked to see this emphasized more strongly; again, inclusion of a case study (a plantation site comes to mind) where the landscape reveals so much about the undocumented inhabitants would have been effective.

Historic farmsteads, which include houses, fields, outbuildings, and related farm equipment and home furnishings, are interpreted most effectively when related farming stories are infused throughout all aspects of the site. All too often, we find that house interpretation embraces agricultural issues only in the kitchen, cellar, and the backyard. Instead, aesthetics and family biography are paramount. Reid includes an inspired, if brief, paragraph on how to connect farm activities and economics to the house interpretation. It would be most useful to pull this out and spend more time suggesting, in question form

perhaps, how the house and the rest of the farm “connect.”

While the book could have used fewer scholarly articles or book chapters, the one article in this book that is an illuminating real-life case study relating directly to interpretation is William S. Pretzer’s “A Curator’s Legacy.” It recounts Peter H. Cousins, Jr.’s quest for a Rust cotton picker for the Henry Ford Museum over nearly twenty years. This article includes and encapsulates so much of what Reid mentions elsewhere in her book. It illuminates what an effective curator does to build a collection by locating, researching, and ferreting out the personal stories associated with an artifact. Cousins’s insistence that this artifact’s story be human-centric rather than based in technological determinism is aptly demonstrated here. The relentless pursuit of an artifact associated with personal agency, the heartbreaking stories of poor cotton farmers and farm workers, and the research and oral history skills required to document the artifact are inspiring. Site interpreters can see, in this article, what curators mean by being cautious about celebrating invention. “A Curator’s Legacy” is a must-read for a curator of any collection.

Overall, the shortcomings in this volume are small in comparison to its comprehensiveness. It is remarkable in its breadth, and Reid manages to include foundational activities and methodologies that every interpreter should know. She urges her readers to do these things, and far more. While this book does not present all of the detail necessary to successfully tackle new interpretation, it comes very close. It has nearly everything it needs to send the interpreter down the right path toward making new connections with audiences and provoking understanding of a community’s agricultural past.

The Art of the Possible

R. DOUGLAS HURT

Debra Reid has crafted an important theoretical and applied guide to help curators and museum administrators interpret agricultural history. Reid’s essay collection, with contributions from museum professionals and agricultural historians with museum experience (Cameron Saffell, Carol Kennis Lopez, J. L. Anderson, William S. Pretzer, Barbara Corson, Jonathan D. Kuester, and Peter M. Noll) provides a useful overview for guiding the creation of museum exhibits. She not only emphasizes the importance of research but also offers useful strategies for conducting it, all with interpretation in mind. Her innovative suggestions for ways that museum staff can engage the public and link visitors to the museum and its exhibits, as well as give them reasons to
return, merit considerable reflection. County and regional museums with little space for interpretation and limited funding for collecting, documenting, and conserving material culture and whose staff might not have much knowledge about agricultural history will find Reid’s book particularly instructive.

Reid is an experienced museum professional and a trained agricultural historian with a national reputation. Both credentials give her the perspective to make the essential point that agricultural museums must present the past as accurately as possible. This means that there is no substitute for research. It also means that curators have considerable ethical responsibility to tell a story as accurately and objectively as possible, unburdened by personal opinion, political preference, or ideology. She correctly observes that rural history is not necessarily agricultural history. I also would add that not all agricultural history is rural history. Her observation is important for any curator attempting to collect, preserve, and exhibit artifacts for agricultural history exhibits or museums. Put differently, many people live in the countryside, but few are associated with agriculture. Focus is important. Curators must ask: “What do I want to do?” “Why do I want to do it?” And, “How am I going to do it?”

Yet few people know much about agricultural history, including museum curators, the public, and farmers. When I taught at Texas Tech, a student told me that he had to miss class the following week to help his father harvest cotton. I asked him whether they used a picker or stripper. He answered “stripper.” I asked why, to which he replied: “Because we always have.” Any cotton exhibit in West Texas should help visitors understand the spread of cotton culture from the Deep South to the semi-arid Southern Great Plains, note varietal change for climatic adaptation, differing soil characteristics, and the importance of genetics and herbicides for foliage reduction, as well as cleaning costs before ginning along with ginning and marketing expenses. Museum curators have the responsibility to convey agricultural history to all visitors, including farmers, with the intent to inform them about the complexity of our agricultural past. A cotton stripper located on the museum floor with an identifying copy label will not communicate the necessary information to visitors about its significance, which involves science, technology, and labor, among other considerations.

I do differ with Reid regarding her comment that museum exhibits are neutral. A tomato harvester, cotton picker, or Farmall tractor on the museum floor may seem neutral, but the copy label is not, unless it has been carelessly written, because the facts require interpretation. The curator mediates between the artifact and the visitor. I believe that museum exhibits—like books,
articles, and documentaries—have a point of view. In the latter case, the work of Ken Burns provides an example. In many respects, museum exhibits are fixed documentaries. Videos and computer technology can make exhibits immediate and exciting if a small museum can afford the investment and provide the expertise for using it. Curators, however, provide interpretation no matter whether they are aware of it. Reid is correct that visitors do not want interpretation. They just want the facts. She rightly contends that visitors trust museum exhibits to tell the truth. Museum visitors trust exhibits for correct information more so than they do the books and articles of historians. Objects and facts in the hands of skilled curators enable unobtrusive interpretation. The public wants to know the facts and significance of an exhibit. They will trust what the curator says about it, but they will not spend a long time before an exhibit to acquire that knowledge. Museum curators must make their point quickly, correctly, and with interpretive accuracy, knowing that such accuracy establishes integrity.

This brings me to my next point: the position of objects, artifacts, videos, or other media help determine the significance of an exhibit. Reid does not provide advice about how to make these decisions. For some curators, it may be intuitive but for others less so. Moreover, I did not see any information about viewing habits. There are studies that indicate that visitors will turn to the right when entering an exhibit area as well as about how much time curators can expect a visitor to look at something. These matters dictate the importance of exhibit location and determine how much text visitors will read on a copy label, wall text, or how long they will watch a video. In a future edition, Reid might want to consider some discussion of these considerations.

One of the most important points that Reid makes is that agricultural curators must take a humanistic approach to interpretation. Curators can and often must include science and social science in their research and exhibits, but the exhibit must mean something in a human context. Agricultural exhibits should be as much visitor-centered as object-oriented, and objects mean little unless explained or given significance. Here, however, I urge Reid to discuss the art of the possible a bit more as well as note the importance of compromise in a future edition.

When I took the position as curator of agriculture at the Ohio Historical Society, for example, a division chief asked me to evaluate an agricultural exhibit and offer suggestions to improve it. The collection focused on nineteenth-century tillage and harvesting technology. A full-scale windmill marked the exhibit from afar. When I made my report, I noted that the wind-
mill had been built after 1912 based on the oil box on top. As a result, I argued for removing it from the exhibit. The division chief did not want to consider this suggestion, arguing that removal would be costly, the museum did not have additional storage or exhibit space, and people liked to see it. This wind-catcher would remain an eye-catcher, though not in the proper historical context. Curators make compromises. Do farmhouses with heavy visitor traffic have steel beams reinforcing the floors? If so, does this detract from its authenticity? Curators often make compromises regarding safety, although they are not always obvious. Children, however, who feed apples to draft horses, may soon discover that horse teeth do not always discriminate between fruit and fingers. The moving parts of a steam engine or threshing machine also require distance for visitor safety, which can interfere with careful, close observation. Agricultural curators, then, must deal with the art of the possible. Compromise requires deliberation, but curators often must make compromises for reasons of safety and insurance.

Agricultural museums, with the possible exception of the largest, most well-funded institutions, such as the Smithsonian Institution or The Henry Ford Museum, cannot do everything. Reid correctly observes that local and regional museums often lack a professionally trained staff in museum practices and agricultural history, and recommends that they should emphasize local agricultural history. They will have some knowledge about it, which will aid their decision-making process, research, and exhibit program. Reid’s suggestion to engage the public with nearby agricultural towns and farms provides a creative way to take the museum beyond its walls. Farms, fields, barns and other buildings can become an essential part of the agricultural museum experience. Innovative public programming based on her suggestions will help ensure a visitor and donor base. Closely associated with farm tours is Reid’s excellent point that agricultural curators can and probably should do some basic marketing research, including an estimate of mileage and driving time for visitors in a museum’s viewing area, to determine who might come and what visitors want to see. By determining public interest and by using oral histories, curators can convey agricultural history that is important to local or regional audiences. An exhibit on agricultural slave labor, for instance, might make more sense than an exhibit about the open-range cattle industry in cotton country. Agricultural museums should focus on the history of their locale. Temporary exhibits can help curators keep museum exhibits attractive to visitors by showing different aspects of agricultural history from beyond the region.
This brings me to another point about visitor expectations and museum responsibilities. Reid notes that explanations of the agricultural past through museum exhibits are limited only by our lack of historical knowledge. The possibilities are endless and the explanation of change over time regarding agricultural markets, farm organizations, gendered responsibilities, and indentured, slave, and migrant labor as well as other issues are important for any agricultural museum or exhibit. Yet these issues at best will rely on interpretation with photographs, videos, labels, and other text. I believe that curators should consider museums as the secular equivalent of cathedrals. Visitors want to see relics. In museums, they will see the True Cross or pieces of it. Exhibits require objects. Too many museums of late have emphasized media technology to replace collections. I am not advocating a return to antiquarianism and meaningless copy labels or the proverbial book on the wall, but rather an exhibit that interprets physical objects with the most informed use of technology that will tell the agricultural history at hand. Explanation and context are essential for agricultural history exhibits to give the physical object significance. A cross-sectional drawing of a combine will convey much, but an actual combine on the museum floor certainly will help convey the intended historical information. This point, however, returns to the art of the possible. Most local museums will not have the space for a combine, so an illustration may serve an explanatory purpose. Even so, agricultural museums and exhibits should emphasize material culture—that is, objects. The creation of agricultural exhibits that must convey knowledge about twenty-first-century developments in agricultural science and technology, however, present challenges when physical objects are observable only through a microscope.

In a future edition, I also urge Reid to address different approaches to convey agricultural history through exhibits for both children and adults, although it is a rule-of-thumb that curators will best reach the public by writing for a sixth-grade reading level and not exceeding fifty words. Still, we often hear people say that museums are important for children and young people. I contend that museums also are important for adults. The exhibit approach for both audiences may be different. Curators must consider this. I welcome Reid’s thoughts about this exhibit and interpretive issue.

Reid’s book, then, provides a useful, indeed, essential guide for interpreting agricultural history at museums and historic sites. It is a guide for action. Its audience is museum curators who might not know much about agricultural history but who need to know how and where to begin interpreting its complex and interlinked parts. The matters of exhibit planning, research,
collecting, documenting, and interpreting are not easy to accomplish and considerable thought must go into each. In this context, then, Reid has provided not only a how-to book, but also a reference for essential tasks and museum possibilities. It is a book that any agricultural history curator should read, reread, and keep at hand for ready reference.

Response
Debra A. Reid

I thank Joe Anderson and the editors of Agricultural History for coordinating this review and thank Julia Brock, Nancy Bryk, and Doug Hurt for their thoughtful comments. The following remarks offer no rebuttal. Instead, I explain some of the parameters established by the series editor and respond to some of the topics and ideas that each reviewer addressed.

Bob Beatty, Vice President for Programs at the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) asked me to write Interpreting Agriculture for the Rowman & Littlefield “Interpreting History” series. Beatty laid out the ground rules: AASLH wanted a book on how organizations could “do interesting/good work with their collections” to interpret “agriculture/farming.” The AASLH, he stated, was “not necessarily looking for a book for an audience of agricultural museums, more for how ‘regular old history institutions’ can use their own resources for excellent programs/exhibits, etc.”

I embraced this challenge because the public looks to museums as reliable places to learn and to make sense of their world. Furthermore, museums of all types, including “regular old history institutions,” have collections that can serve as springboards to hot topics, including concern about the environment, advocacy for local food sourcing, and resistance to genetically modified organisms. The mandate, however, was to not focus on two of agriculture’s most timely issues for the public—food and environment—because other books in the series already addressed those subjects. Thus, I knew from the beginning that the book should address “agriculture” on its own merits and not digress

10. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). The field needs an updated study comparable to Presence of the Past to assess how web-delivered content such as Ancestry.com and new technology such as smart phones have created additional opportunities for personal engagement with the past as well as for crowdsourcing interpretation.
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into one of the reasons farmers actually farm (food) or to the mutual dependence between the environment and production. This proved challenging, forcing me to be creative about agriculture as a humanities subject and to review basic processes—research, material culture analysis, and interpretive method—from the vantage point of agriculture.

My goals for the book were threefold. First, interpreting agriculture should be a group activity undertaken in many settings. It may start with a museum visit, but many hands influence the content and experience before and after a museum visit. The primary audience for the book is paid and unpaid staff at museums and historic sites, but Interpreting Agriculture should also serve visitors, consultants and content experts, and teachers of agriculture, social studies, and humanities subjects. For many in these audiences, agricultural literacy is low. Second, I wanted to convince readers that a humanities approach to a STEM subject would enrich their museum experiences. This requires collaboration with experts in several fields. It is as important for scientists to consult with historians and humanities scholars as it is for historians to work with scientists. Third, museums of all types, anywhere, not just small-town or rural institutions, have the potential to interpret agriculture. Historians understand the links between city and country as they relate to the production of food and fiber, finance, as well processing and marketing.

Each of the participants in this roundtable point out aspects of the book that I would like to engage. Julia Brock correctly notes that the appendices may be hard to find. Page limits precluded including this content in the book, but it appears in its entirety at: http://alhfam.org/InterpAg. There, readers will find annotated lists of other organizations engaged in agricultural education and interpretation, a bibliographic essay, a timeline of agricultural policy and partisanship, and resources for livestock care developed by the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums.

More significantly, Brock uses her own museum experience to suggest the ways in which the book can be useful for living history interpreters. Living history relies on interaction and participatory techniques, but other kinds of museums can become more participatory. A strong body of literature recognizes the need to develop programming to engage multiple learning preferences, including kinesthetic learning to ensure hands-on as well as minds-on learning.

Doug Hurt raises the issue that readers could benefit from the application of exhibit methodology to the agricultural context. He notes studies that document visitation patterns (visitors tend to turn right!) and short attention
spans. Nancy Bryk also requests more interpretation fundamentals and more studies that demonstrate best practices. A rich literature on human interaction with exhibits and best practices for exhibitions exists, which readers of this journal may wish to consult.¹²

In general, though, exhibits should put artifacts into context and convey central themes in as few words as possible. Avoid placing a book on the wall. Instead, begin scripts with a thought-provoking title, include introductory text of one hundred fifty words, subthemes with one hundred twenty-five words, and link objects to themes in narratives of sixty words or four hundred characters. Limiting the word count provides precise, specific information that holds visitor interest, keeps information flowing, and provokes visitors to learn more. For example, the sixty-word narrative about one object on exhibit at The Henry Ford reads:

Henry Ford expressed an early interest in power farming. He and two associations married parts from the 1905 Model B and 1907 Model K, added real wheels from a grain binder, and built the lightweight “automotive plow” seen here. This early experimental tractor was one in a series of designs culminating in the production of the Fordson tractor in 1917.¹³

The need for brevity extends to oral interpretation of historical artifacts and processes. Museum fatigue happens, and too little can be much more powerful than too much. Presenter training at The Henry Ford requires practice talks limited to two minutes designed to orient visitors to a key object or idea, link the artifact or idea to mission-relevant points, and reinforce the goal of the guest experience—to inspire people to learn from traditions of ingenuity, innovation, and resourcefulness to help shape a better future. Presentations end by providing direction to the guest, sending them on their way to explore related topics.

The birthplace of Henry Ford, moved to Greenfield Village in 1944, provides an example of the need to balance historic context with the reason why many visit, which is simply to see Ford’s birthplace. A sign at the front entrance orients guests to the house. It balances information about Ford’s


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preservation agenda with his attitude about farming. Guests enter the farm-house and usually stop at the first room they see, a bedroom to the left of the entrance, but most do not linger there. Instead, they bear right and enter the formal parlor. Many want to learn more about the furnishings and Ford’s preservation efforts, which they learned a bit about on the orientation sign.

Yet the house also provides the only primary evidence of farm life as lived by Ford family members. Visitors are primed to learn about agriculture because the sign notes that Ford thought that farming was boring. That first bedroom provides an opening to explore Ford’s assessment through the lives of those who lived there. Henry’s maternal grandparents died, leaving his mother an orphan at age three. Margaret and George Ahern (O’Hern) raised Mary Litogot. In 1861, they contracted with a farmer-carpenter named William Ford to build them a new home. When William and Mary married, the young couple lived in the upstairs of the new home while the Aherns lived in two downstairs rooms. All of them worked to build a life on the farm. On March 20, 1876, Henry’s mother died. Henry was twelve years old, the eldest of six surviving children. Henry, with his father and grandfather and younger brothers, continued to grow grain, straw, and hay for markets in Detroit, only eight miles away. Ford’s two younger sisters (aged nine and seven), along with female relatives and hired girls, tended to essential farm and housework for the predominately male household.14 This farm family history puts the quote about “boring” farm work into context.

Conny Graft, a visitor studies practitioner and author of clearly written “how-to” documents, asked me point-blank during a workshop at the 2017 AASLH conference, “What do you want visitors to learn by visiting the agricultural exhibit at The Henry Ford?” I explained that I wanted to ask visitors to discover their interests, but she countered that curators need to start with aspirational goals. These goals then become the focus of visitor studies to solicit opinions, gauge interest, redefine goals, and articulate an exhibition’s main theme or a historic site’s interpretive mission. Workshop participants indicated that they would like to influence consumer choices to support and increase sustainable practices. Others said they wanted to help visitors think about technological determinism to challenge ideas about the value of industrial and organic production. Some wanted to explore urban agriculture in historic and present contexts. Lesson learned: We should not be afraid of

14. Biographical information on Henry Ford is abundant, with his opinion that farming is boring being often repeated. For more on Ford family history and their farms, see Ford R. Bryan, The Fords of Dearborn, 2nd ed. (Ford Books, 2004).
articulating ambitious goals on controversial and charged agricultural topics.\textsuperscript{15}

Hurt’s encouragement to “address the art of the possible” can be a call to arms for all of us. We should not underestimate public interest in agricultural history, and we can fan that interest by being creative in the ways we link historic evidence to current issues. All reviewers commented on this. Thoughtful agricultural interpretation should generate discussions about policy, power, and use of spaces at a specific time or across time. Local histories provide a perfect foundation to address agricultural history. For instance, discussions of historical farming practices allow us to explain the role of genetics throughout history. A balanced treatment of fertilizer and pesticide use can inform visitors about a family’s economic choices as well as the policies in place to manage those chemicals in a farm context in contrast to their use by lawn care companies and golf course managers. Controversial commodities such as hemp, tobacco, and marijuana, as well as the links between farm chemicals and rural methamphetamine production and use, offer opportunities for anyone eager to engage the public in discussions about agriculture.

Interpretation of current issues might rely less on three-dimensional objects because, as Hurt states, curators encounter a challenge “when physical objects are observable only through a microscope.” Museums may not collect cells, but photographs, microscopes, and gene-splicing tools can add dimensions and show the crop scientist’s perspective, allowing us to see genetics and other STEM disciplines through a humanities lens.

What does the future hold? The 2018 conference for the National Council on Public History provides an opportunity for more conversations about the potential of agriculture and public history through a working group coordinated by David D. Vail and me. This group will sustain the conversation and will generate new ideas and publications. Additional treatment of the stuff of human existence (farm, food, fiber, and fuel) can help fill the gaps identified by Brock, Bryk, and Hurt. These are exciting times for agricultural historians who do public history. The more we put agriculture into a humanities framework, the more we can facilitate public engagement with agricultural and rural spaces and the stories that have shaped them, past and present.