

Questions for Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Duke, 1997)

You may find the readings at: <http://www.jefflittlejohn.com/williamsburg>

Chapter I: The New History in an Old Museum

Reading, pages 3-8.

1. When Richard Handler and Eric Gable talk about the "New History," what do they mean? What type of history is the "New History"?
2. What problems do social historians have with "older" or "more traditional" types of history?
3. Handler and Gable say that social history is "constructionist" and "relativistic." What do these terms mean?
4. When did social historians bring their approach to Williamsburg, and what did they hope to accomplish?
5. What "obstacles" did the social historians face at Williamsburg?
6. Handler and Gable talk about "critical history and celebratory history" being "juxtaposed paradigms . . . in what conservative intellectuals have managed to characterize as a 'culture war'" (Handler, *New History*, 7).

What does this mean, or more specifically: a) what is the difference between critical history and celebratory history; b) which side do Handler and Gable think the "New (social) History" is on; and c) where have some of the main struggles in the "culture war" occurred?

Reading, skip pages 8-14

Reading, pages 14-27

7. When and how did Handler, Gable, and Anna Lawson carry out their research at Williamsburg?
8. How did Handler and Gable describe the "two sides" of the organization at Colonial Williamsburg? (see the last lines of page 15 to 19).
9. Who are the people that visit Colonial Williamsburg? (see pages 19-20).
10. The authors focused on five aspects of museum life. You might look over them on pages 22-23.
11. Two concerns dominate the book. First, "the arrival of social history and, more generally, the changing Colonial Williamsburg story" (23). Second, "the tension or contradiction between the foundation's two sides" (23). Be sure you are familiar with these concerns.

Chapter III: Why History Changes, or, Two Theories of History Making

Reading, pages 50-59

1. What is the "Patriot's Tour"? How is it a "kinetic map to Colonial Williamsburg and its work" (50)?
2. Handler and Gable give a "synopsis of the [Patriot's] tours" they witnessed. Describe the synopsis briefly.
3. Handler and Gable nicknamed the Patriot's Tour the "invisible landscape tour" (57). Why? What two explanations (58-59) did they give for the guides' emphasis on the invisible landscape? Is this a fair assessment?

Reading, pages 59-60

4. Handler and Gable asked interviewees why history changes. What two responses were most common?
5. What is the "constructionist theory"?
6. What is the "realist" or "objectivist" theory?

Reading, pages 60-70

7. "When people at Colonial Williamsburg drew on th[e] constructionist model [of history], they identified four major paradigms that have guided the museum's work from its inception to the present" (61). What were these four? Describe each of them briefly.

8. Look closely at the goals of the social historians, which are given in detail on pages 66 and 67.
9. What three themes did the Curriculum Committee of 1977 emphasize? See page 67.
10. What do Handler and Gable mean when they say that, in the minds of the social historians, “[t]he museum as a laboratory . . . would teach social scientific analysis rather than ideology”(67)?
11. What do Handler and Gable mean when they say that “social science – or science in general – can itself be considered an ideology” (70)? How did the new “rhetoric of laboratories, experiments, and the progress of research, fit easily into an ethos that had been part of Colonial Williamsburg’s culture from the beginning”(70)?

Reading, pages 70-77

12. Describe the second theory of history. What is Progressive Realism or Mimesis?
13. What two metaphors do Handler and Gable find to explain this type of history?
14. What do Handler and Gable find ironic about this approach? (page 76)
15. How does the “rhetoric of mimetic realism mesh” with the “constructionist theory” that Handler and Gable described earlier (see and read carefully the last paragraph on page 76)?
16. Handler and Gable say that “mimetic realism has built into it an assertion of its superiority, as a theory of why history changes, over constructionist versions of history making”(77). How is this “built in”? Or, simply explain the last paragraph on page 77.

Chapter VII: New Challenges

Reading, pages 148-151

1. Colonial Williamsburg went through a restoration under Carlisle Humelsine and Cary Carson in the late 1970s. These men introduced the new social history to Williamsburg (pages 148-150).
2. What place did African Americans have in this new social history approach? (150-51)

Reading, skip pages 152 to the bottom of 154.

Reading 154-177

3. Describe the “Black History Program” and “Other Half Tour” (154-155).
4. Skim ahead to 156. How did Williamsburg work to present “African American life in the countryside”? (156-158)
5. What about Women’s History? How had it been portrayed in the mid-century? (158)
6. After praising Williamsburg for the advances it made in African American and Women’s History, Handler and Gable redirect themselves. What is the “BUT,” of this story? (159)
7. Skim ahead to 163. Thirteen years after the African American interpretation program began, how did it stand?
8. How was the issue of a “mock slave auction” handled? (163-164)
9. Skim ahead to 167. What did Ada Louise Huxtable say about Williamsburg in 1997, and what do Handler and Gable think of her criticism?
10. What role did the Williamsburg Institute fill? (168)
11. What did Peter Feuerheard write about Williamsburg’s effort to portray slavery in 1999?
12. On pages 168 and 169, Handler and Gable give their final examination of African American history at Williamsburg. What was the situation there by the turn of the century, and what did they think about it?
13. What is the point of the Epilogue? (173-177)