

# **Representation of the past in public spheres**

Experiencing the past:  
the reconstruction and recreation of  
history at Colonial Williamsburg



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history at Colonial Williamsburg

<Martine Teunissen>

Author: Martine Teunissen, M.Phil  
Owner Beleef Het Verleden  
[www.beleefhetverleden.nl](http://www.beleefhetverleden.nl)

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Pictures used in this book have been mainly taken by the author herself, partly during her internship at Colonial Williamsburg, with kind permission of the Revolutionary City management team. And a few pictures have been taken in museums and during historical events.

## Foreword

This research has been conducted in Colonial Williamsburg in 2006 while I was studying at the College of William and Mary in Virginia and has been finalized during my research master 2006-2008 at the University of Leiden, The Netherlands. While I was conducting the research in Colonial Williamsburg I had great help from my internship supervisor Conny Graft, the management team of Revolutionary City: director Bill Weldon and actor-director Richard Josey and actor-interpreter Marc Schneider. A special thanks goes to the late professor Rhys Isaac who was teaching a course on Colonial Williamsburg at the College of William and Mary. He has been a great mentor and his lessons were a great stimulation of critical thinking about Colonial Williamsburg as a whole. It is through his lessons that I really learned the power of public history. I would also like to thank Eduard van de Bilt, my supervisor of this thesis, who always made time to discuss the progression of my work.

After my graduation at the Leiden University I started my own company: Experience The Past / Beleef Het Verleden ([www.experiencethepast.org/](http://www.experiencethepast.org/) [www.beleefhetverleden.nl](http://www.beleefhetverleden.nl)) and I have been working as a public historian ever since. A few articles that I have written about this research have been published in wider volumes about heritage interpretation. For example 'Staging the Past in the Revolutionary City, Colonial Williamsburg' in: Staging the Past. Themed Environments in Transcultural Perspectives, (History in Popular Cultures, Volume 2) transcript Verlag Bielefeld 2010. And: 'Evaluation of the Revolutionary City (Colonial Williamsburg): A Programme of Theatre as a Valuable Tool for Interpretation' in: On the Future of Open Air Museums, Fornvårdaren 30 (Jamtli Förlag 2008).

However, I have always felt the wish to publish this work as a whole, so that history students and people who are interested in the workings of museums can learn about the different elements that determine a representation of the past. With my newest project: the Living History Academy ([www.livinghistoryacademy.com](http://www.livinghistoryacademy.com)) it is my wish to continue teaching about this field of expertise in order to help practitioners to improve the quality of their work. I hope this publication will help in that respect.

Colonial Williamsburg has been developing and changing their programs as they have done over the years since their creation. When I conducted my research in 'The Revolutionary City' program it had just been created and was still critically tested. After 10 years (in 2016) Colonial Williamsburg discontinued the Revolutionary City Program. In 10 years time from now, we may see a different approach to the history representation again, but that is exactly why public history is so fascinating and why we should remain aware of all the different elements that determine the recreation of the past. It is our task to make history matter to the public.

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# 1. Introduction

## *1.1 Who owns history?*

History has never been the exclusive domain of academics. Despite the past's elusiveness, people try to get a grip on the past in many diverse ways. Whether it is in historiography, in museums, or pursued as a hobby: people reconstruct, represent, and recreate the past. Reconstruction refers to the idea that a historical narrative is not a mirror to the past (historic realism) but a construction with coherence that did not occur as such in the past itself. This constructed coherence is called historical interpretation or historical representation.<sup>1</sup> Recreation also refers to reconstructing the past, but with a focus on an imaginary past, the invention of tradition, and the creation of a past for ideological purposes.

For a long time academic historians and other collectors of the past did not seriously interact. Only recently academics started to pay serious attention to the ways the past is preserved by non-academic institutions and represented to a non-academic public. Since the 1970s, 'public history' emerged as a separate field of research in the United States.

While giving a new dimension to the objectivity debate by adding the issue of memorialization, public history studies have expanded the scope of historical discussions to include many forms of historical representations. Since most people learn about history through other media (or institutions) than schools or universities, it is important to be aware of, and involved in these other media, the more

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, Meppel 2002) 108.

so because we are not only dealing with issues of education, but also with the creation and the forging of collective and national identities.

Both public historians and academic historians are concerned with selecting and ordering the past to make it understandable, and both have to deal with many ideological uses of the past for present purposes; public historians even more so than academic historians. Selection necessarily involves some kind of simplification: whether the degree of simplification is appropriate depends on the genre, and the different dynamics of genres, of every single reconstruction and representation of the past.

## ***1.2 Research Questions and Structure Thesis***

This thesis is not so much about what happened in the past, or how historians have reconstructed it, but how the past is reconstructed and represented by an open air (or outdoor) museum, in interaction with contrasting interests: commercial and academic. I will explore how Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia, United States) tries to balance between the expectations and interests of different groups, such as academic historians, business managers, educational managers, and the public, and show how they are influencing the way the past is represented. The interaction between these different elements determines the limits and possibilities of a reconstruction of the past in the public sphere. The tense relationship between the diverse interests in Colonial Williamsburg will be discussed in the American context and the broader discussion about the reconstruction of the past.

The chapter about historiography serves as a theoretical introduction into the field of public history, its emergence, and

influences on the discussion about the representation of the past. While exploring theories by, amongst others, David Lowenthal, on the reconstruction and uses of the past, Michael Kammen, about the American attitude towards the past, Pierre Nora, about the memorialization debate, and Eric Hobsbawm, on the invention of tradition, I will show in general how the past is revealed and reconstructed, and for what purposes.

The open air museum is one of the media where past preservation and representation are discussed in the public sphere. In chapter three I will examine why these institutions developed since the late nineteenth century, how they did and do represent the past, and for what purposes. One of the more recent methods of making the past available in open air museums concerns the concept of 'living history'. The emergence, possibilities, and limits of 'living history' will be examined.

An exchange program at the College of William and Mary, Virginia, gave me the opportunity to examine the creation and representation of the past in Colonial Williamsburg on many levels. Because of the size of the organization I mainly focused on the representation of the past in the 'Historic Area', only one of the ten departments of the entire Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The fourth chapter will focus on the creation of, and debates about these historical representations.

How has Colonial Williamsburg shown the past since its creation in the early 1920s, up to the present? And what perspectives are used to show it: local, national or global perspectives? Is the presentation shown from a political or social point of view, top-down

or bottom-up, is it an individual or collective story: whose history is presented?

In addition to the 'what' question, the 'why' question has to be investigated, focusing on the intention of the historical representation and its message. Why has Colonial Williamsburg chosen to show that particular piece of history, from that particular perspective, to achieve what? This question focuses on the different purposes of Colonial Williamsburg, in particular: academic research, education, ideological purposes (legitimacy, creation of collective memory and identity, glorification of one's culture) and business and tourism. To investigate a museum's intention it has to be placed in the historical context of the emergence and development of the museum.

Furthermore, how does Colonial Williamsburg get its message across? What methods are used to present the past? I will investigate interpretive frameworks since 1977, with a main focus on living history. I will show how these frameworks are influencing the historical representation, and for what purposes they are created. This will include theories on the use of theater as a method of social interaction and provocation, sensory experiences, and education. Is theater used to educate, or rather to entertain? How does Colonial Williamsburg make history matter for a present day audience? The analysis of the development of the interpretive frameworks is important to place the creation of the latest interpretive program in its context (chapter four). At the end of the chapter, the different images Colonial Williamsburg promotes will be compared.

Chapter five comprises the creation-process and outcome of one particular historical representation in Colonial Williamsburg, namely, 'The Revolutionary City' program. This theatrical program

serves as a case-study to investigate the representation of the past in Colonial Williamsburg in more detail. Again similar questions are posed about the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of the historical presentation.

I will examine the purposes of the Revolutionary City program and place them in the context of Colonial Williamsburg as a museum, but also in the context of historiographical discussions about the American attitude towards the past. In order to analyze and evaluate the program, the contents of the theatrical scenes are examined in detail. Furthermore, the development of the program as historical theater will be analyzed, including a discussion about the possibility of recreating a historical 'reality', using first- person interpretation. Then, general themes from the scenes are compared with historiographical works on the same subjects to investigate the mutual influence between Colonial Williamsburg's history presentation and historiography, as well as to study the 'correctness' of the contents of the historical presentation.

Although politicians and museum interpreters refer daily to the use of heritage as educational and as a means to re-create identities, it has never really been investigated how, and whether this works. When the contents and intentions of the Revolutionary City program are clear, the findings of a survey that I have done with visitors of the Revolutionary City program are presented to show how the program is received. This relates to the perception of the past in practice. The program will be evaluated from an academic perspective, as well as from the perspective of Colonial Williamsburg, as a history museum and business cooperation.

In conclusion, the question remains whether Colonial Williamsburg, despite its constraints as a living history museum,

presents a meaningful and 'correct' representation of the past. The history presentation, the use of history, and the influence on the American collective memory will be evaluated.



Kitchen in the Governer's Palace, Colonial Williamsburg 2006.  
Photography Martine Teunissen.

## 2 Historiography: The Creation and Representation of the Past

### 2.1 *Changing attitudes towards the past*

The past is omnipresent and integral to life whether experienced individually or collectively, but can we ever capture the past and reconstruct it? With the rapid transformation of society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nature and accessibility of the past became issues of interest to many people. David Lowenthal<sup>2</sup>, professor emeritus of geography at the University College in London, argues in his book 'The Past is A Foreign Country' that "only after the eighteenth century did the past become a romantically attractive alternative to the present. As revolutionary change rapidly distanced all known pasts, yearning for what was felt to be lost suffused European imaginations."<sup>3</sup> From then on, the preservation and accessibility of the past became major occupations.

Yearning for lost pasts and the recognition of a historical difference led to the development of an historical awareness or historical consciousness. People increasingly began to see the past as a new realm with its own psychological codes.<sup>4</sup> It is because of the dramatic social changes that modern historiography came into being as an intellectual discipline. With Leopold von Ranke, who is often referred to as the father of historiography, a scientific orientation

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<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal was one of the first scholars to critically examine the history representations of outdoor museums

<sup>3</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York, Cambridge 1985) 49, also: 13-15.

<sup>4</sup> *Representations*, No. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000), 10.

towards the past was endorsed by a critical use of sources. Ranke promoted the possibility to recover an objective past by critically analyzing documents without prejudice. Many scholars became occupied with an attempt to recapture an objective real past. For a long time objectivity was the core value of the historical profession. However, the cultural, political and social changes during and after World War I created 'historical relativism' which questioned objectivity. An even greater challenge to objectivity was posed by the turmoil of the sixties.<sup>5</sup> The idea of a possible objective past began to be discussed in the so-called 'objectivity-debate'. This debate was highly influenced by postmodernists in the 1980s who distrusted concepts of truth and authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Although there is no such thing as real objectivity, the debate still continues and seems to be an on-going discussion without an end.

Since the 1980s the objectivity debate has opened a new dimension that is expressed in the debate about memorialization. This debate is influenced by the recently increased attention for the manner in which ordinary people deal with the past. This increased attention for the public and the past can be seen as an outcome from the emergence of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, which included previously ignored groups; broadening the public scope, as well as expanding the methods of history.

The French historian Pierre Nora is one of the first historians who applied the methodological problems of memorialization in a broader context. His multivolume study about French national memory underlines the rise of democracy as an important

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge, New York 1988) 1-17, 111, 415.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Lorentz, *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* (Meppel, Amsterdam 1990).

interconnected factor with problems of making a national past.<sup>7</sup> The terminology Nora uses and the discussion he evokes about issues as memory and history, are often referred to in later studies of this subject. Therefore this chapter will give considerable length to these matters.

A comparable volume that gave a great impulse to the new public history is Michael Kammen's extensive study 'Mystic Chords of Memory' which is part of a publication in which he analyses the American past over much the same period as Nora does. Kammen who is professor of American cultural history at Cornell University, emphasizes how America has evolved as a nation from rejecting tradition to a tradition-loving country, "a land of the past" and a "culture with a discernible memory".<sup>8</sup> Kammen emphasizes the problematics of memory, and the growing dependency upon collective memory since the 1870s. He shows the forces and significant events that shaped the way Americans remember and use their past. Because Kammen's work directly relates to the way Americans deal with the past, the changing American attitude towards the past will be discussed shortly.

From the American Revolution to about 1870, Americans seem to be fairly indifferent towards their past, except for the Revolutionary narrative: since the time of independence they had to invent bonds and solidarity which could hold them together in political union.<sup>9</sup> Historical attention increased due to the traumas caused by

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* Vol. 1-3 (New York, 1984-1998).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory. The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1993). 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-62

Appleby, J. Hunt, L., Jacob, M., *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, London, 1994) 91-92.

industrialization and the Civil War. From 1870 to 1915 the narratives deal with a broadened past, and history is increasingly used as a mechanism for social and political unification. As in Europe, Americans begin to long for tradition, and use this concept interchangeably with 'history' and 'memory'.<sup>10</sup> In Kammen's third stage (1915-1945), Americans long for a nostalgic past. Tensions with memory or history, traditionalism and modernism, populism and elitism encourage new interest in folk culture and a democratizing view on the past.<sup>11</sup> In the final stage from 1945 onwards, memory is seen as 'heritage', and is used in a more abstract form.<sup>12</sup> In this stage, Americans become nostalgically obsessed with the past, and are often historically ignorant to what actually had happened.

In comparing Kammen's post-1945 account with Nora, John Bodnar<sup>13</sup> has argued that "it seems that public discussion over the past had been detached considerably from the political contest between elites and democrats that had marked the revolutions of both nations and the politics of national memory for a very long time."<sup>14</sup> Overall the discourse on national memory revolved around an elemental issue: democracy. The importance of the democratic narrative in the representation of the past in Colonial Williamsburg will be discussed in chapter four.

Since the 1980s historians have increasingly become occupied with the question on the representation of the past in public areas. The studies by Kammen and Nora underline this concern with a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 93-298.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 299-530.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 531-704.

<sup>13</sup> History professor and co-director for the 'Center for Study of History and Memory', at Indiana University, Bloomington.

<sup>14</sup> John Bodnar, 'Pierre Nora, National Memory, and Democracy: a review' in: *The Journal of American History* Vol. 87, No. 3, December 2000, 951-963.

general use of the past; a use by ordinary people. Acknowledging this public aspect is a vital point that distinguishes the debate about memorialization from the objectivity-debate. On the one hand, the debate about memorialization is a repetition of the objectivity-debate. On the other hand, it is far more specific, concrete and practical in its application, and therefore leads to new areas of research. The objectivity-debate is mainly discussed in a small academic circle, whereas the debate about memorialization is much broader, and it is discussed in many realms of public history. The question about the representation of the past in Colonial Williamsburg in interaction with academic and commercial interests, fits within this debate, and within the new field of public history.

## ***2.2 Public History***

In one of the first analyses of this new field in history-studies, public historians Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp argued that “in a very real sense, public history was part of the upheaval which struck all of higher education in the last two decades. Its increasing stature added to her confusion of the late 1960s and 1970s, decades which watched history enrolments drop and history departments shrink.”<sup>15</sup> Especially the great job scarcity in higher education in the 1970s and 1980s, forced many historians to seek opportunities outside the academic world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara J. Howe, Emory L. Kemp, *Public History: An Introduction* (Malabar, Florida, 1986) 9.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Greenberg,

∇Ηιστορψ ισ α Λυξυρψε: Μρσ. Τηατχηερ, Μρ. Δισνεψ, ανδ (Πυβλιχ) Ηιστ ορψ □ ιν: *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Special Issue: The Challenge of American History (March 1998), 29.

Howe and Kemp describe public history as “the adaptation and application of the historians’ skills and outlook for the benefit of private and public enterprises.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense public historians offer a service, though not for the academic enterprise *per se*. Barbara Franco, the executive director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, calls public history the “catch-all for non-academic history in many media.”<sup>18</sup> For Howe and Kemp, the main difference between public and academic history is the way of deliverance. Academic history seems to ignore the utility of the past, while public history does not.<sup>19</sup> Franco argued that public history can mean “for the public, of the public, by the public, and with the public. Each preposition changes the relationship of history and public and affects the nature of historical practice.”<sup>20</sup> Public history’s utility inevitably involves a social function towards the present and the future.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, public history was not an entirely new area: since the nineteenth century, all kinds of institutions have focused on the representation of the past for a general public. Thus, historians applied their skills for a long time in these ‘public’ areas, but the debate about public history recently gained attention in the academic world and became distinguished as a new field. According to Douglas Greenberg, history professor at the University of Southern California,

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This impetus of historians in the public world increased professionalization in the museum world.

<sup>17</sup> Howe, Kemp, *Public History*, 12

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Franco, ‘Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective’, in: *The Public Historian*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring 1997) 65-67.

<sup>19</sup> Howe, Kemp, *Public History*, 14

<sup>20</sup> Franco, ‘Public History and Memory’, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Roger I. Simon, ‘The terrible gift: Museums and the possibility of hope without consolation’ in: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, September 2006, 187-204.

it is a recent and even an American idea.<sup>22</sup> It is true that public history as a specific field in the academic sphere becomes more and more accepted in America, but as a field of history *by* and *for* and *with* and *of* the public, it is seen in a more general way.

Despite academic attention, many professional historians still tend to look down upon public history and popular history makers. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s public historians were often called second-class historians.<sup>23</sup> Because popularizing history may involve simplifying and dramatizing the past, academics think public history cannot present a 'correct' presentation of the past. But what is correct, and from which perspective? This negative attitude also exists the other way round: the average consumers of history, people enamored with their family histories, who go to museums and watch historical films or documentaries, tend to refer to school history as boring and less connected to the past.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, there remains a striking tension between public history and academic history. This tension manifests itself not only at the just described level of engagement with history, but also at the level of trustworthiness. In a survey done by the social and cultural historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, ordinary American respondents gave a mean score of 8.4 (out of a ten-point scale) to the trustworthiness of museums, compared to only a mean score of 7.3 for college history professors.<sup>25</sup> Although both history museums and academic historians try to present history in a manner that pleases

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<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, 'Ἱστορῶν ἰσ ἂ λυξυρῶν', 294.

<sup>23</sup> John D. Krugler, 'Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America', *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 1991): 347-386, 349.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998) 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

the audience and the existence of both depends on the audience's pleasure, which is measured by ticket purchases and book sales, the average public seems to think that academics are more self-interested, and therefore less trustworthy.<sup>26</sup>

The public also seems to put more trust in museums for their apparent authenticity of collections and exhibitions. However, the authoritative voice of the museum weakens the view that museums also engage themselves in (subjective) interpretation and controversy. James Gardner, associate director of the National Museum of American History, argued that "the public needs to understand...that we [museums] are not, even when we claim to be, objective historical authorities."<sup>27</sup> The public should be made aware of the process of selection, shaping perspective and the subjective points of view.

Amongst others, academics worry whether this really happens. Furthermore, academics think that a history representation should be detached objective, and truthful to facts. The use of history for political or ideological purposes is unacceptable to them, whereas public history inherently to its social function needs to give a meaning to the past that is useful in present and future. Although academic historians strive towards detached objectivism, the American

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<sup>26</sup> These figures are applicable to Americans only, but it shows that academics should be more concerned with the other side. This study was intended to find out how Americans understand their past. A random survey was held in the form of interview questions with follow-up probs. The 808 national interviews statistically provided a representative national survey. Also four racial, ethnic groups were included, making the total number of interviewees 1500.

Rosenzweig, Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 209-231.

<sup>27</sup> James, B. Gardner, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," in: *The Public Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Fall 2004), 15.

historian Eric Foner<sup>28</sup> has argued that: “each generation rewrites history to suit its own needs.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the use of the past in public history seems to be stronger than in academic history.

This takes us back to issues of objectivity, and the changed debate towards memorialization. David Glassberg, history professor at the University of Massachusetts, relates public history to the new historical interest in memory.<sup>30</sup> History is experienced by public audiences both as individual and collective memory, and is often related to tangible remnants of the past. According to Franco, “audience research shows that visitors combine abstract information with highly personal and specific memories to create new syntheses for themselves.” She emphasizes that “the reengagement of academic historians and other disciplines in the scholarship of memory, place, and public practice, will help define and shape the public issues of history to the betterment of history in all its many forms.”<sup>31</sup>

With this thesis, I hope to narrow the gap between academic and public history, and I hope to achieve more cooperation for the benefit of all. One fact is obvious; academics can no longer ignore the influences and importance of this new area of research!

The rise of public history and the debate about memorialization renewed discussion about issues as memory, history, and tradition, and increased attention for the past as a reconstruction, used for our own purposes; as a product of the present.

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<sup>28</sup> Eric Foner is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University.

<sup>29</sup> Eric Foner, *Who owns history? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York, 2002), xii.

<sup>30</sup> David Glassberg, ‘Public History and the Study of Memory’ in: *The Public Historian* Vol. 18 (Spring 1996) 7-23.

<sup>31</sup> Franco, ‘Public History and Memory’, 66, 67.

### ***2.3 The Uses of the Past***

Lowenthal examines five reasons why we need the past. In the first place, the past reaffirms and validates the present. Hindsight and remembrance of memories gives meaning to past and present perceptions. As Foner has emphasized: “history serves mainly to rationalize the status quo.”<sup>32</sup> Secondly, Lowenthal mentions the use of the past for the creation of identity. One has to be aware of past experiences to know oneself, and to be able to relate things to each other as a means of self-development. As Lowenthal states it: “the ability to recall and identify with our past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value.”<sup>33</sup> The third point he mentions is “guidance”, in the sense that we can learn from the past. This point has been recognized since the beginnings of humanity. Fourthly, the past can also be an enrichment to life, and lastly, the past can function as an escape to an unacceptable present.<sup>34</sup> The latter did not occur before modern times drastically changed traditional society.

### ***2.4 How is the Past Revealed and Reconstructed?***

According to Lowenthal there are three routes to the past: memory, history, and relics. All three are connected with specialist disciplines: psychology, history, and archaeology respectively, but “knowing the past embraces wider perspectives than these disciplines normally treat.”<sup>35</sup> If ‘history’ is the reconstruction of the past, it seems strange to call it a tool for recovering the past. Therefore, it is wise to make a distinction between the past, what happened in earlier times, and

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<sup>32</sup> Foner, *Who owns history?*, 86.

<sup>33</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-50.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

history, the reconstruction and representation of the past.<sup>36</sup> Both concepts are often used interchangeably, causing much confusion.<sup>37</sup>

Memories are conveyed by diverse tools such as objects, written and oral sources, or memories that are connected with rites, words, names, and customs.<sup>38</sup> A memory can be abstract, but is still connected to images of relics that might no longer exist. Relics and memories are therefore interdependent.

Thus, the past comes to us by relics that are used as a window to the elusive past, and by memories that are both abstract, as well as connected to these relics. As Stuart Semmel, associate professor in history at the University of Delaware, has written, “the tangible may open a window onto the past. But the view through that window is murky and uncertain.”<sup>39</sup> The reconstruction of the past is needed to come as close to the past as possible. However, the past can never be entirely known. History is always a selective interpretation of relics and memories, constrained by current culture.

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<sup>36</sup> Ingrid Jacobos, Kees Ribbens, *Geschiedenis is van iedereen. Uitgevonden tradities, hergebruikt verleden* (Utrecht, 2001) 12.

<sup>37</sup> James Young argues “history is what happened; memory is the recollection that binds what happened to ourselves in the present.”

J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993) 116.

<sup>38</sup> R.E.V.Stuip, *Omgang met het verleden* (Hilversum 2001) 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> Stuart Semmel, 'Reading the Tangible Past: British Tourism, Collecting, and Memory after Waterloo' in: *Representations*, No. 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (Winter 2000), 30.

## ***2.5 Memory and History***

Memories are the awareness of the past which is vital for our sense of behavior and identity. Without memory we cannot notice the consequences of our actions, and we cannot understand ourselves. As stated before, memory gives meaning to identity, because people identify with remembered states and actions.<sup>40</sup> However, in historiography, the concept of memory goes further than that, and has changed in the course of history. The many appearances of the concept and its different meanings make it difficult to have just one definition. Therefore, an outline of the development and the main meanings of memory is needed.

In the nineteenth century, efforts to define normal behavior and studies of the functioning and dysfunctioning of memory, developed a more scientific approach towards past-present relations. According to Michael S. Roth, assistant director at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, "the investigation of memory dysfunctions contributed to the psychologization and hence privatization of our relationship to the past."<sup>41</sup> We see a professionalization of psychology with Sigmund Freud's late nineteenth century development of psychoanalysis in which he tried to discover connections in the unconscious mind. His attempt to restore memories under hypnosis, or by analyzing dreams, was meant to liberate the patient from unconscious barriers that might have been caused by unknown past memories. In this sense the past is

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Knapp, 'Collective Memory and the Actual Past' in: *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989), 137.

<sup>41</sup> Michael S. Roth, 'Remembering Forgetting: Maladies de la Memoire in Nineteenth-Century France' in: *Representations*, No. 26, 64.

meaningful to the present to cure mental illnesses.<sup>42</sup> To Freud, memory was an individual phenomenon.

The break with the traditional and modern world has caused different perspectives on concepts such as 'memory' and 'history'. However, few academics paid much attention to the concept of memory. Scholarly attention first started in the early twentieth century, but it was not until the seventies, with the development of public history as a specific field of research, that attention increased. In the 1980s, through the publications of theories by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, professor of Jewish history and culture studies, and Pierre Nora, the concept of memory became part of the scholarly discourse.<sup>43</sup> Both Yerushalmi and Nora contrasted memory to modern historical consciousness, and described it as primitive or sacred.<sup>44</sup> Especially Nora's work is often referred to in historiography about this topic.

According to Nora, "the gulf between the two [memory and history] has deepened in modern times" and they "appear now to be in fundamental opposition."<sup>45</sup> Nora describes memory as follows: "memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>43</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989).

Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire' in: *Representations*, No. 26, 7-24.

<sup>44</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse' in: *Representations*, No. 69, 127.

Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 7-24

Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish history and Jewish memory* (New York, 1989) 93-95.

<sup>45</sup> Nora, 'Between Memory and History' in: *Representations*, No. 26, 8.

and periodically revived.”<sup>46</sup> Lowenthal’s contrastingly writes that “memory is inescapable and prima-facie indubitable.”<sup>47</sup> Although Nora stresses the fact of continuous alteration of memory, he also describes it as “absolute” memory, in contrast with history “which can only conceive the relative.”<sup>48</sup> History, in opposition to memory, is the critical reconstruction of the past, “always problematic and incomplete of what is no longer.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Nora argues that “memory is blind to all but the group it binds”, in contrast with history which “belongs to everyone and no one, whence its claim to universal authority.”<sup>50</sup>

The opposition between memory and history seems less fundamental than Nora describes. The reconstruction of the past is like memory continuously altered, and memory can be incompletely recalled, just as history is incompletely reconstructed. Lowenthal even argues that “memories must continually be discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order.”<sup>51</sup> Nathalie Zemon Davis, history professor at the University of Princeton, and Randolph Starn, professor emeritus of history and Italian studies at the University of California, Berkeley, also stressed the interdependence of memory and history, rather than insisting on a supposed fundamental opposition. They state that “this does not necessarily mean that the relationship is or should be a balanced or stable one. If anything, it is the tension or outright conflict between

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 187.

<sup>48</sup> Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’ in: *Representations*, No. 26, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 205.

history and memory that seem necessary and productive.”<sup>52</sup> Also Kerwin Lee Klein, associate professor at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that Nora and Yerushalmi are mistaken about the opposition of memory and history. According to Klein the old idea of material memory was included in Hegel’s historicism. As he notes: “‘historical consciousness’ married history and memory.”<sup>53</sup>

The notion of some difference is valid, however, because of the transformations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that frayed society’s connection to memory, or its connection to the past. As with all developments, this did not happen overnight, and its connotations are constructed in hindsight. In short: memory is what we remember about past happenings and history is not what happened, but how we choose what to remember: the reconstruction of the past. The ‘past’ is what happened (and can never be recovered in total or entirely objectively). As argued before, history also keeps being used as a synonym for the past. The difficulty with these concepts is their interconnectedness; the descriptions will often overlap, despite a separate analysis of the two concepts.

Thus, Nora’s opposition of ‘memory’ and ‘history’ aroused a great debate, and although nowadays the argued opposition no longer stands, it stimulated the debate about memorialization. Especially Nora’s idea of *les lieux de mémoire* or ‘sites of memory’ played an important role. Memories are related to the image of a place where memories are connected with the past, present and future. *Les lieux de mémoire* are all places and expressions to which a memory is attached. They are specific entities (material or non-material) that have become

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<sup>52</sup> Nathalie Zemon Davis, Randolph Starn, 'Introduction' in: *Representations*, No. 26, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Klein, ‘Emergence of Memory’ in: *Representations*, No. 69, 133.

symbolic parts of the memorial heritage of a community. Sites of memory thus include museums (for instance Colonial Williamsburg), memorials, monuments, cemeteries, and cathedrals, but also all kinds of rituals. According to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* became distinguished once ideological narratives (for example the Nation state) began to fade.<sup>54</sup> It is thus a phenomenon of modern times. In the context of national memory, *lieux de mémoire* are all the rituals, traditions and ideas that are part of the nation's collective past.<sup>55</sup>

In his analysis of memory, Nora further distinguishes memory in "true memory" and "memory transformed", in which the former relates to gestures, habits, and unspoken traditions that are unconscious, and the latter relates to memories that are transformed by its passage through history.<sup>56</sup> This distinction and notion of a true memory seems futile, since memory can never be recalled without alteration. Nora's own idea that "memory only accommodates those facts that suit it"<sup>57</sup> speaks against the notion that it is possible to conceive a true memory. A remembered past is not a fixed or static one, but endures continuous change, as Lowenthal states:

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<sup>54</sup> Nora's multivolume history of French national memory analyses the problem of making a national past since the Revolution in 1789 and the start of the 'ancien régime'. According to Nora, forces such as globalization, individualism, democratization, and mass culture have disturbed traditional ideas about national history. Also Willem Frijhoff has argued that the organized search for community identity started when globalizing forces "blurred the traditionally accepted, self-defined boundaries of countries, nations, peoples, and other long established communities."

Lecture by Willem Frijhoff, 'Form, experience, and meaning. Reflections on the representation of time and space in ethnology museums' during 23rd conference AEOM, (August 27, 2007) 11.

John Bodnar, 'Pierre Nora, National Memory, and Democracy: A Review', in: *The Journal of American History* Vol. 87, Issue 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>56</sup> Nora, 'Between Memory and History' in: *Representations*, No. 69, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Nora, 'Between Memory and History' in: *Representations*, No. 69, 8.

“recollections are malleable and flexible.”<sup>58</sup> Moreover, “the past...is both historical and memorial: its scenes and experiences antedate our own lives, but what we have read and heard and reiterated makes them part of our memories too.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps this ‘true memory’ can be connected to relics in tangible form; Nora’s form of memory is mainly material. Lowenthal argued that “unlike memory and history, relics are not processes but residues of processes.”<sup>60</sup> In this way they seem to be unchangeable. However, to validate things as they were, people continuously reaffirm memory and history in tangible form.<sup>61</sup> By doing this they might alter the meaning of relics for present purposes. Again one cannot speak of a true memory. Nevertheless, this idea has been very important in establishing collective memories in the light of nationalism. In the nineteenth century, in The Netherlands, for example, local cultural folk phenomena like Frisian farmers were put into museums because one believed that they represented pureness. Because of their ‘backwardness’, people thought that the customs, clothing and language of the Frisian farmers had not been affected by modern times. This absence of modern influence made them more authentic, representing the good old times.<sup>62</sup>

Memories can be both collective and individual. A collective form of memory is most apparent, because other people’s memories

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<sup>58</sup> Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 206.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>62</sup> Adriaan de Jong, *Dirigenten van de herinnering. Musealisering en nationalisering van de volkscultuur in Nederland (1815-1940)* (Amsterdam 2001) 41-122.

In this 2001 PhD dissertation De Jong shows the new meaning of memory: historical memory is constructed by musealizing folk culture.