POVERTY AMIDST WEALTH: WOMEN’S HISTORY IN THE COLLECTIONS, EXHIBITS, AND FUTURE OF THE CAPE FEAR MUSEUM

Elizabeth Bullock

A Thesis Submitted to the
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art

Department of History
University of North Carolina Wilmington
2015

Approved by

Advisory Committee

Kathleen C. Berkeley

Janet Davidson

Paul A. Townend

Kenneth P. Shefsiek

Chair

Accepted By

Dean, Graduate School
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................................... iv

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: BEYOND INCLUSION: EVALUATING EXHIBITS FOR WOMEN’S HISTORY ................................................................. 26

CHAPTER 2: FINDING WOMEN IN COLLECTIONS: PRIORITIZING GENDER AS A CATEGORY IN COLLECTIONS RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PLANNING .................................................................................. 60

CHAPTER 3: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE CAPE FEAR MUSEUM: A RESOURCE EVALUATION FOR WORKING WOMEN ......................................................................................................................... 91

CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................................... 120

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................................................... 126

APPENDIX

A. Visitor Survey Tool .......................................................................................................................... 135
ABSTRACT

This case study of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science in Wilmington, North Carolina outlines some of the challenges of interpreting and collecting women’s history faced not only at the Cape Fear Museum but at other museums as well. Through an exhibits review, a collections assessment, a resource evaluation, and a visitor study, this case study offers some considerations and solutions to expand the museum’s understanding and interpretation of women's history. A more complicated representation of women’s history would enrich the overall interpretation, bring added relevance by providing context for modern women’s and gender issues, and appeal to visitor interests, as suggested by the visitor survey.

The Cape Fear Museum’s collection contains rich possibilities for interpreting women’s lives; however, limited research and cataloging practices have made it difficult to find objects relating to women’s lives. If the museum makes women’s history part of collections policies and plans, it can help ensure that artifacts are considered for their connections to women’s history and researched and cataloged thoroughly. An evaluation of the current permanent exhibition found that despite the rich resources in the collection, the interpretation has missed opportunities for inclusion of and deeper engagement with women’s history. This study points out sources and artifacts that could be used to expand women’s history content in the permanent exhibition, as well as strategies for creating a more balanced representation. A resource evaluation does the same for a proposed temporary exhibit about women’s work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first thank my committee, Dr. Tammy Gordon, Dr. Ken Shefsiek, Dr. Jan Davidson, and Dr. Kathleen Berkeley for their time and guidance. Each of these excellent scholars provided a unique viewpoint and a different area of expertise. All of them encouraged and challenged me to produce my best work, providing ideas, support, and direction. I am especially grateful to Dr. Gordon, my chair, for her unwavering enthusiasm for not only this project but also for every course, project, and endeavor I undertook with her. Thank you.

I also must thank the Cape Fear Museum, especially the Collections Department staff. Dr. Jan Davidson, the museum historian, supervised my internship which started this project, offering suggestions for research avenues and sources. Barbara Rowe, the curator, gave me unfettered access to her files and assisted greatly in the planning and implementing of the visitor survey, securing the necessary permissions and mediating between myself and museum staff. Terri Hudgins, the registrar, provided a work space for me, gave me access to Re:discovery, collections policies, and other materials and answered numerous questions about the database, procedures, and policies. Additionally, I would like to thank Lynda Danley, Pepper Hill, Rachel Smyer, Angela Sparrow, Ike Wintin, and all of the visitor services and education staff for allowing me to come and go during the conducting of my visitor survey and offering tips on times and days when visitors would be most readily available.

A big thank you also to Jennifer Daugherty of the New Hanover County Public Library’s North Carolina Room for her help in finding materials relating to local women’s history.

Finally, I must thank my family, friends, and most importantly, my fiancé, for supporting, encouraging, and putting up with me over the last two busy, stressful, wonderful years.
INTRODUCTION

The Cape Fear Museum’s introductory panel for one section of its permanent exhibition, *Cape Fear Stories*, describes life in the 1800’s in the Lower Cape Fear region, listing the members of the growing city of Wilmington, including “new immigrants, established families, skilled and unskilled workers, entrepreneurs, businessmen, bankers, professionals, service workers, rich and poor, slave and free.”¹ This panel ignores gender as a determinant of lived experience and takes an androcentric approach with the use of “businessmen” and the focus on formal economic activities. Women were also members of this growing community and played important, if often less public roles in its development through participation in informal economic activities in the home as well as outside of it. This panel demonstrates the permanent exhibition’s focus on issues of class and race at the expense of gender and is just one of many examples of how women’s lives are obscured and gender issues are marginalized in favor of other topics in the museum’s current exhibits.

Other sections of the exhibition include objects owned by women and many labels even use specific women’s names. However, even in these cases the interpretation is cursory and stereotypical. In a case detailing home life in the nineteenth century, Ann Eliza Williams Beery’s jewelry is displayed with a label identifying her as the wife of “shipbuilder Benjamin W. Beery.” Rather than explaining what her jewelry can tell us about her, her status, or even offering more about her relationship with her husband and his status, this label simply connects Ann Beery’s

¹ *Cape Fear Stories*, permanent exhibition, Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Wilmington, North Carolina. The permanent exhibition as it stands currently was installed at various points between 1992 and 2010. The first section, “Land of the Longleaf Pine,” which traces the region’s history from pre-European contact through the Revolutionary War, was installed in 2010. With that installation came a few changes to the existing nineteenth century gallery which remained from 1992. The twentieth century gallery was added in 2003-2004 with some changes made in 2006 after a leak was addressed.
identity to her husband’s. It provides no context and no understanding of what her marriage to a shipbuilder would have meant for her life or any idea of what her duties were. While the specifics of Ann Beery’s life may not be available, some context could be provided based on scholarship about women’s lives in the nineteenth century. The same case offers several additional examples of artifacts unaccompanied by any real interpretation of the women who owned them.

These examples are representative of the Cape Fear Museum’s current representation of women’s history, demonstrating that women are sometimes included, that objects are available to interpret their lives, but that there are missed opportunities to interpret women’s history more critically. Many labels stop short of explaining how women’s lives were affected by gender assumptions of the past. Many artifacts in the collection have provenances that either describe women only in terms of their husbands or neglect to tell more about the uses of artifacts owned by women.

These issues are partly a symptom of the manner in which past museum staff wrote the permanent exhibition’s labels and in which staff has cataloged objects. Many labels, both about men and women as well as other topics, neglect to make larger connections, contextualize the individual’s experience, or fully explain the use of an artifact. The labeling method throughout most of the permanent exhibition relies on using artifacts simply as examples and a way to visually populate display cases, which leads to cursory labels that do little to connect objects or people to larger themes or place them in context. Despite overall issues with labels and cataloging, other topics, such as slavery and segregation, are still interpreted more fully than women’s history, suggesting that more could be done even within the limitations of the current cataloging and labeling methods.
The missed opportunities discussed above point to the potential for women’s history to be better collected, understood, and interpreted through the collections and exhibitions of the Cape Fear Museum. This case study analyzes the current state of the exhibitions and collections, considers the challenges facing the interpretation of women’s history, and evaluates possible avenues for improvement while also pointing out how an improved interpretation of women’s history can enhance the current exhibits and appeal to visitor interests. The museum currently underutilizes its many resources for interpreting women’s history. In collections there is a need for more research and more thorough cataloging, both of which could be more easily accomplished if women’s history was made a clear intellectual priority in collections policies and planning. Increased research on women’s history and on objects relating to women’s lives would make artifacts pertaining to women’s lives better understood, improve cataloging, and make them more accessible for use in exhibits.

Currently, the Cape Fear Museum’s permanent exhibit focuses on other topics and themes, most notably the history of slavery, segregation, and racial tension in the region. This interpretive focus on race as the most important determinant of life in the region misses out on opportunities to explore the connections between race, class, and gender and neglects to realize the pervasive effects of gendered expectations on the lived experiences of Cape Fear people of the past. The current exhibits do not reflect the wealth of available resources and do not interpret the wide variety of women’s experiences. Strategies that address the lack of sources, which challenges the interpretation of women’s history, and seek to interpret both women’s domestic and public experiences could lead to a more inclusive and critical interpretation of women’s lives. A recently proposed new temporary exhibit on women’s work offers the opportunity to explore the museum’s resources and interpret women’s lives more critically.
The use of words and phrases such as women’s history, gender history, and gender above raises the question of the difference between them. Women’s history is the study of women’s lives in the past, including their contributions, duties, occupations, and daily lives. Gender history, which has roots in the field of women’s history, is “based on the fundamental idea that what it means to be defined as man or woman has a history.”

Sonya O. Rose defined gender history in her 2010 work, What is Gender History?, and explained how “scholars use the concept of gender to denote the perceived differences between and ideas about women and men, male and female.” Rose pointed out that the foundation of gender history is the idea that gender is socially constructed. Historians of gender are interested in tracing that construction over time.

Historians also use gender as a category that can help explain relationships between people and groups of people, much like the categories of race and class. Joan Scott’s foundational essay, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” first published in The American Historical Review in 1986, defined gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes” and “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” In so doing, Scott began a conversation on the uses of gender in historical analysis by arguing that it could be used to “decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction.” Using gender to analyze the past helps to understand relationships between men and women as well as relationships among women of various backgrounds.

---

3 Rose, 2.
5 Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, 45-46.
The focus of this work is on women’s history with gender as an analytic tool. Using gender to analyze women’s history can explore what it meant to be a woman according to men, cultural leaders, politicians, or women themselves. While this work focuses on women’s history because of its past underrepresentation, the interpretation of men in museums, while perhaps more represented, also often lacks the critical attention to the effects of gendered expectations on men’s daily lives. While this work argues specifically for the further inclusion of women’s history with a gendered analysis, both men’s and women’s historical experiences could be more critically represented by giving more attention to the category of gender in both collections and exhibitions.

Through the use of an exhibits evaluation, a collections assessment, a resource evaluation for the proposed new exhibit, and a visitor survey, this case study of the Cape Fear Museum provides an example of the steps other museums can take to improve their interpretation of women’s history. The Cape Fear Museum is an example of museums’ underutilization of resources relating to women’s lives and of the tendency of museums to stereotype, marginalize, or exclude interpretations of women in their exhibits. This case study identifies some of the challenges to interpreting women’s history and offers an opportunity to explore possible solutions. In terms of exhibits, this case study outlines possible solutions to crafting a more balanced, complex interpretation of women’s history, including evaluating exhibits for missed opportunities, evaluating available resources in the museum’s collections as well as primary and secondary sources, and going beyond mere inclusion by representing the many facets of women’s lives, both public and private, notable and ordinary. In the collections of museums, steps include finding artifacts relating to women in collections, critiquing the way in which those artifacts are cataloged, and making women’s history more central in collections policies,
research, and planning documents so that artifacts relating to women can be better understood and more easily accessed.

In order to analyze the Cape Fear Museum’s current representation of women’s history and its potential to enrich that representation, I conducted an exhibition evaluation, a collections assessment, a resource evaluation for a proposed new exhibit, and a visitor survey. These assessments focused largely on the present; however, a brief history of the museum and an understanding of the recent past helped to contextualize the museum’s current collection and interpretation.

The exhibition evaluation included a critical walk-through of the current permanent exhibition, Cape Fear Stories, which traces the history of the region from pre-contact through the twentieth century, a review of a listing of the museum’s exhibits from 1977 through the present, and an analysis of the files kept on several of the museum’s past exhibits, especially those with potential for a woman-centered interpretation. These files included exhibit planning documents, such as interpretive plans, label texts, and object lists.

The collections assessment involved searching the museum’s collections database software, Re:discovery, as well as reviewing the current collections policy, drafts of collections plans, and documentation of collections planning activities ranging principally from the 1980s through the present. These collections planning activities included conference attendance and other collections initiatives. The assessment also involved reviewing various documents regarding the history of the museum, especially those pertaining to the changing focus of collecting over the years.
The resource evaluation for the proposed new exhibit on women’s work included analyzing the initial planning documents created by museum staff with regards to the proposed exhibit, conducting secondary and primary source research on the history of women’s work in the region, as well as searching for specific collections items already held by the museum, all of which was to determine what supporting materials existed for an exhibit on women’s work. This type of research also provided insight into the available resources suggested for adding more women’s history into the existing permanent exhibition.

Finally, a visitor survey was conducted in order to gain insight into visitors’ assumptions and opinions towards women’s history in general and at the Cape Fear Museum specifically. This visitor survey both gauged visitor interest in women’s history and its current interpretation and served as a front-end visitor evaluation for the proposed new exhibit, offering insight into visitors’ expectations for an exhibit focusing on women’s history. The survey was conducted via in person interviews with twenty visitors as they exited the permanent exhibition over the course of several days in the months of December 2014 and January 2015. They were asked to rate their interest level in women’s history, if they felt the Cape Fear Museum should include more women’s history, what associations came to mind in response to the phrase women’s history and then the word gender, and what expectations they would have for an exhibit based on either of these subjects. Visitors were also asked to provide basic demographic information including their age, zip code, race, and gender. While the survey only represents a small sample of the visitors to the Cape Fear Museum it is suggestive of visitors’ interest in many topics relating to women’s

---

6 For the complete survey instrument see Appendix A. This survey tool was developed following guidelines in museum visitor evaluation, specifically those set out in Judy Diamond, Jessica J. Luke, and David H. Uttal, *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings*, (Lanham, MA: AltaMira Press), 2009.
history and offers insight into the kind of information the museum could gain if the staff engaged in further visitor evaluation, an important step at any museum that has decided to pursue further interpretation of women’s history.\(^7\)

All of the methods together suggested that in order to enrich the current interpretation of Cape Fear history and to interpret women’s lives deeply and critically, the museum will need to consider changes in its cataloging methods, research its collection with women’s history in mind, address gaps of inclusion in its interpretation, and present a more complex view of women’s history in the Cape Fear Region.

While the Cape Fear Museum is a singular example, it is representative of a larger issue in public history: that of the continued underrepresentation of women’s history in museums and historic sites, an issue repeatedly raised by public historians, women’s historians, and activists. Scholarship suggests that the issues of inclusion and critical interpretation faced by the Cape Fear Museum in its interpretation of women’s history affect other sites and museums. A 2012 workshop sponsored by the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites [NCWHS] produced a series of recommendations for improving the interpretation of women’s history and echoed the Secretary of the Interior’s call for historic sites to “reflect the significance of women and girls being half of our U.S. population.”\(^8\) The recommendations included initiatives meant to

---

\(^7\) The month of December had a total of 554 adult visitors. The month of January had a total of 573 adult visitors. Only adults were surveyed. During the survey period, the museum hosted several family learning activities. Visitors to these activities that did not also tour the permanent exhibition did not fall into the survey’s protocol and were not asked to participate. Only those visitors who exited the permanent exhibition at its chronological end were asked to participate.

improve both the interpretation of women at parks and sites and the experience of female visitors. This initiative is just one example of recent discussions and efforts of public historians seeking to improve the interpretation of women. The National Council on Public History’s online platform, *Public History Commons*, has eight articles published between February 2013 and August 2014 tagged with the word gender, all either calling for improvements in the way women’s, gender, or LGBT history is interpreted or celebrating the relatively few individual projects which represent those needed improvements. Like many of these other calls for improved interpretation of women, the NCWHS’s recommendations focus on furthering “the inclusion and quality of preservation and interpretation of women’s history” with the main emphasis being on the addition of multiple female voices in an effort to acknowledge the plurality of female experiences. However, the NCWHS recommendations, like much of the scholarship in public history on women’s history, is focused on women’s history at historic sites and house museums rather than history museums.

While much has been written about the need to incorporate women into historic sites and house museums and the specific problems facing those sites, some similar calls have been made by those working in history museums. This goal of inclusion is an excellent one that activists,

---


women’s historians, and public historians have demanded for decades.\textsuperscript{12} However, by advocating for mere inclusion, many public historians are missing out on the potential of available women’s history scholarship to go beyond inclusion to a more complicated, gendered interpretation of women’s experiences. While women’s historians have produced volumes of scholarship on various aspects of women’s lives and the influence of gender, museums and historic sites have been slower to integrate women’s history, working toward inclusion of more women’s perspectives but not an in-depth interrogation of the category of gender. However, history museums can push beyond mere inclusion of women and instead examine why women’s lives differed from those of men and answer how gender affected lived experience.

As museums seek to explore peoples’ gendered lived experiences, they might turn to academic history, which has been using gender as a category of study in order to answer similar questions at least since Joan Scott’s foundational article mentioned above, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” Public historians have written less about the interpretation of the concept of gender beyond merely adding in women’s stories. The few recent articles regarding the state of interpretation of women and gender point to the need to not only add women’s stories but also question categories of gender and discuss the effects of gender as a social category on people of the past.\textsuperscript{13} Public history could benefit from academic historians’ scholarship on women’s historical experiences as viewed through a gendered lens.


Women’s history is a relatively new field in the discipline of academic history, beginning in the midst of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Like many other “subaltern” or underrepresented histories, women’s history began as a way to “find” women in history and add their stories to the main narrative. This method, coming out of political activism of the times, worked to add the voices of female racial minorities, the poor, and workers. In the 1980s and 1990s women’s history intersected heavily with scholarship on race resulting in a growing number of works on women of various races and ethnicities, especially African American women. This period also saw greater attention to masculinity, gay and lesbian history, and working-class history as historians explored connections between categories of race, sexuality, and class. More recently, historians have begun to explore issues of gender and sexuality including same-sex relationships, sexual assault and rape, and transgender and third-gender categories of gender identity. Current trends in women’s history seek to understand how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation interact and overlap in order to shape identities and experiences and to compare women of various statuses in order to understand the relationships among different women. Gender analysis has been influential on women’s history, helping to understand how gender ideals and constructions affected women’s and men’s lived experiences.

Some public historians have called for increased interpretation of the topics and themes addressed by academic historians in the areas of women’s history, noting that a gap exists.

---


between what is studied in the academy and what is presented at sites and museums. This lack of communication between academic historians and public historians in the field is an issue with regards to many topics, not just women’s history. Denise Meringolo wrote about the distance between the two fields, arguing that “public historians' sense of professional identity, tools of interpretation and traditions of story-telling are nearly incompatible with those who dwell in the academy.” She also argued that a taxonomy had developed in the field of history that “locates public history beneath and perhaps to the right of university-driven historical scholarship.”

Public history developed as a distinct field to academic history with public history scholars often criticizing academic history for elitism because of its academic audience. This relationship between the two fields has sometimes hindered collaboration between the two.

In terms of women’s history, the wealth of scholarship on many facets of women’s lives has not been incorporated in many public history settings. In 1989, Barbara Melosh argued that women’s domestic lives were not presented in museums in a critical way. She found that most exhibits were about notable women’s public roles and few exhibits were about women’s domestic experiences. If domestic roles of women were interpreted, they were presented stereotypically or with nostalgia rather than critically. These interpretations were offered despite the fact that women’s historians had produced a great deal of scholarship about women’s domestic experiences and relationships in the home, including conflict, abuse, and other “difficult” topics. Melosh argued that this neglect was due to museum directors “striving to avoid

16 Melosh, 197 and Dubrow and Goodman, 9.
any material that might upset or offend their constituencies.” Gail Lee Dubrow’s has similarly argued that “the challenge ahead is to forge fruitful connections between academic historians and their counterparts at relevant historic properties.” Such connections would help historic sites and museums to more critically interpret women’s history.

Several other scholars, writing after Melosh, in the 1990s and early 2000s made similar points; however, some of the same issues continue to exist today. Several recent articles on the National Council on Public History’s Public History Commons blog expressed concern about the lack of input the National Women’s History Museum is giving to women’s historians.

Additionally, a 2014 survey conducted through the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites found that in the area of interaction between historians in the academy and those based at sites there remained a “disconnect,” with respondents reporting that they felt “the conversation between university and college-based historians and public historians in the field had stalled.”

Public historians expressed the need for more exchange with academic women’s historians as well as the potential of place and structures, particularly house museums, to be resources for women’s historians. This same survey, conducted in Spring 2014, also found that about 90% of respondents considered themes of gender and the body underrepresented or nearly absent at sites at which a visitor might expect to see it.

---

19 Melosh, 207.
20 Dubrow and Goodman, 9.
One method of including more scholar-influenced women’s history in museums is through reimagining the way objects are presented. Tangible evidence of the past has long been appreciated in museums for its ability to relate the past to present visitors.\(^{23}\) Beyond helping to present the past though, collections can help to know the past as well. Artifacts can serve as documents themselves, helping to piece together what happened in the past. In the discipline of material culture Thomas Schlereth has identified five “evidential qualities that are more prominent in material culture evidence than in documentary evidence.”\(^{24}\) These qualities include evidential precedence, meaning that artifacts predate speech and writing; temporal tenacity, the relative long-lasting quality of tangible artifacts and their “high degree of evidential veracity” or general lack of bias; three-dimensionality, the sheer fact that artifacts take up space and mass and provide some understanding of past spatial relationships; wider representativeness, material culture’s ability to represent those who did not leave written records as not all people were literate; and affective understanding, a “type of knowing” that allows viewers to learn and engage with the past through one’s senses rather than one’s mind.\(^{25}\)

In the case of women’s lives, especially those of minority groups or working class, written documents are not always as commonly available as when studying men. In certain eras, the lack of sources written by women themselves is also a challenge to historians. Women are also less likely to be fully represented by statistical evidence, such as census reporting of

---

\(^{23}\) One such example comes from Page Putnam Miller, editor, *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women’s History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1992. Miller focuses on historic sites, structures and landscapes, rather than objects; however she asserts that sites also offer a powerful sense of place, which Miller regards as “equally as important as the research potential of these tangible resources” (Miller, 3). David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig likewise assert the power and appeal of the tangible in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1998.


\(^{25}\) Schlereth, 8-12.
occupations since women’s work often took place in the home. The “wider representativeness” of artifacts can serve as the only evidence of the lives of some women, offering much needed insight into the work, relationships, and daily lives of women. Some objects have the potential to demonstrate women’s active roles, especially those made or used by women in their daily lives. Specifically, domestic artifacts have been a material culture source for women’s historians. Several studies have examined kitchen tools and appliances in order to study women’s household work and how these tools have affected “woman’s place” in society. Studies of clothing have also been done in order to examine how clothes reflect gender identification and social status.

Additionally, many artifacts can be analyzed in order to better understand gendered expectations of women. Clothing, beauty supplies, advertisements, and other popular media offer insight into how companies, media, and people saw women and expected them to behave, dress, and look. Similarly, artifacts representing women’s departure from these expectations also offer insight into the differences between gender ideals and lived experience. Public historians have also suggested ways to interpret artifacts usually associated with elites or men from other perspectives. Jennifer Pustz describes how in households with servants, any object used in the home could be reinterpreted as an object cleaned and maintained by a female servant.

Objects have the potential to tell many different stories and be interpreted in a variety of ways as evidenced in several works that have used artifacts to uncover and explain activities.

---

26 Schlereth, 166-67.
27 For example, Denise Heinze examines the roles of women in baseball films, taking note of the “virgin/whore dichotomy” that plagues sports movies, only offering roles for women as supporters of male leads or as antagonists that seduce a man and prevent him from reaching his potential. Heinze argues that these films represent the continued popular opinion that athleticism is something naturally male, not female. Denise Heinze, “Angels in the Ballpark: Women in Baseball Films,” Gender in Popular Culture: Images of Men and Women in Literature, Visual Media, and Material Culture, (Cleveland, OK: Ridgmont Press), 1995, 25-26.
associated with women. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich based each chapter of her work, *Age of Homespun*, on an object or group of objects. She detailed how the object was made or used and wove those details into the human story. Marla Miller used tangible objects in her study of Betsy Ross’s life. She described in detail the work that Ross and her family members did in the sewing trades including upholstery and flag-making. By describing the process of creating various goods, Miller is connecting material goods to experiences. She also included photos of the few remaining personal items of Betsy Ross and used them to create a picture of Ross’s personality. Using gender as a “category for analysis,” as Joan Scott framed it, can explain the lived differences in men’s and women’s lives. Objects in museum collections can be used to highlight women’s history as well as to examine more deeply gendered expectations in the past.

Despite the calls for inclusion of women, the recognized need for the incorporation of scholarship employing gender analysis with respect to women’s history, and the potential of artifacts for telling women’s stories as well as for investigating gender, the above discussion demonstrates that scholars still argue that many museums and historic sites lack an equal representation of women’s lives. The analysis of the Cape Fear Museum’s collections and exhibits found that the Cape Fear Museum is not making the best use of its rich available resources regarding women’s lives. This thesis explores the available resources as well as the way in which the museum is currently presenting women's history, offering potential solutions and considerations that can help to interpret women's history more critically and thoroughly. There are several ways in which the museum staff could more fully address women’s history and work to further its inclusion and analysis in collections policies, planning, and research as well as

---

in exhibits and interpretation. The Cape Fear Museum could represent women’s history more fully and critically, enriching the present interpretation, which currently focuses highly on race.

The advantages of interpreting women’s history more fully include broadening audience, appealing to visitor interests, and maintaining relevancy to present-day issues. Women and girls make up roughly half of museum visitors, a point that Emily Curran made in her 1992 article, “Half the Students in Your Museum Are Female: Gender Equity in Museum Programs.” While focusing her argument on educational programming for students in museums, Curran made an important point that still remains relevant today: museums should provide interpretations of history that allow visitors to make connections by “reflect[ing] the students’ [or visitors’] own realities and feelings.” Representations of the past that favor male activities present the incorrect notion that women were not participants in the past.

One male respondent in the survey of Cape Fear Museum visitors underscored the importance of equal representation when he explained that he had a high interest level in women’s history because of his wife and daughters. He went on to cite his daughters’ interests in science and sports when suggesting topics in women’s history he would like to see more of in the museum’s current exhibits, indicating that he feels it is important for his daughters to see examples of women’s past accomplishments and roles in the areas in which they are interested. The visitor survey also revealed that visitors in general were interested in women’s history. The average interest rating was 3.85 out of 5. The topics visitors wanted to know more about also indicate interest and desire to see more on women’s lives in the exhibits at the Cape Fear Museum. Visitors listed topics such as women’s rights, suffrage, women in sports, women’s

31 Visitor survey.
education, women in science and technology, change over time, accomplishments, and transitions. This wide variety of topics shows a great deal of widespread interest in women’s experiences.

Visitor interest and women’s strong presence in museum audiences point to the advantages of including more women’s history, namely improved visitor satisfaction and connections. Changes in women’s roles throughout the last several decades also point to the increasing benefit of appealing to female visitors. While women tend to make up half of museum audiences already, strides toward closing the gender gap in terms of education level has made the advantages of representing women in the past more crucial. Women now outnumber men on many college campuses. While men outnumber women two to one in the total number of people who hold professional and graduate degrees, women make up the majority of those now graduating from professional and graduate programs. Museums typically attract college-educated visitors meaning that women may soon make up a clear majority of museum visitors.32

Equal representation of women may help women visitors already attending museums feel more connected with the past and inspire and promote equity in other areas of their lives.33 Visitors are more likely to feel engaged with the museum’s exhibits and programs when seeing themselves represented in them. This concept is a basic principle of interpretation identified as early as Freeman Tilden’s fundamental work, Interpreting Our Heritage. Tilden lists as his first of six main principles of interpretation that “any interpretation that does not somehow relate

what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.”³⁴

In addition to addressing visitor interest and better representing their audience, museums can gain additional relevance by interpreting women’s history. While the gender gap in education decreases, disparities in pay continue with women making only 79% of what their male counterparts make.³⁵ With continued debates over equal pay and topics such as feminism, sexual assault, and reproductive rights still being heavily covered in popular media, women’s history may be more relevant in museums than ever before.

Overall, the underutilization of the museum’s tangible resources has led to a lackluster interpretation of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum. However, there is huge potential in the many available resources in the museum’s collection. Improving research and cataloging so that gendered connections are better understood and made more accessible could bring to light many interesting artifacts that could be used to interpret a more full and complicated understanding of not only women’s lives but also men’s lives. Exploring more of women’s lives in the exhibits will also create a more complete and richer interpretation of the region’s history, making important connections to the existing interpretations of topics such as race and class. Making connections among these categories would create a more complete, interesting story of the region and a more accurate one as these categories certainly did not exist in isolation in the past.

Concrete examples of how to make better use of the tangible resources of history are needed to demonstrate how public historians can go beyond the “add-women-and-stir” method of

---

³⁵ “Museums and Society 2034,” 7-8.
inclusion. This dearth of examples is even greater for traditional history museums than for historic sites, the focus of most other guides to interpreting women’s history. For these reasons, I focus on the Cape Fear Museum of History and Science in Wilmington, North Carolina as a case study for how museums, and other public history sites, can approach their collections, policies, and exhibits in order to provide a fuller, more complicated interpretation of women’s history.

The Cape Fear Museum was founded in 1898 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Cape Fear Chapter No.3, and began by collecting “Confederate relics and records.”36 The museum was closed between 1918 and 1929 because of the use of the museum’s original home in the Wilmington Light Infantry headquarters building in World War I, as well as the opinion of a committee assembled to address the issue of a leak in the roof. The committee decided that the collection should be sent to the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh for better preservation and increased accessibility for the public. Some of the collection returned to Wilmington in 1930 and the museum was then run by the North Carolina Sorosis, a local women’s social and civic organization. Under the guidance of North Carolina Sorosis, the collections policy of the museum shifted from only Confederate and Civil War history to all of Wilmington’s history. In 1962, the museum again changed management as the City of Wilmington and New Hanover County jointly operated the museum until 1977 when the museum became the responsibility of New Hanover County alone.37

The Cape Fear Museum is an excellent choice for a case study because it is representative of many local and regional history museums. The Cape Fear Museum’s governance, size, and
location all make it relatively typical of history museums in the United States. The American Alliance of Museums’ statistics on accredited museums provide some context for the Cape Fear Museum. In terms of governance, the museum is managed by the county government, a category shared with two percent of accredited museums. However, all museums operated by government bodies, including federal, state, and local governments, account for nineteen percent of accredited museums. Government-run museums share many of the benefits, such as relative stability, steady budgeting, and structural support, as well as the disadvantages of that governance model including bureaucracy and inflexibility.

The size of the Cape Fear Museum in terms of budget is also representative of many other museums. With an adopted budget for the 2014-2015 fiscal year of $1,209,655, the Cape Fear Museum falls into AAM’s largest category of 1 million to 2.9 million, in which thirty percent of accredited museums fall. The staff size is also representative with the Cape Fear Museum’s less than 15 full-time staff members placing it alongside the 28 percent of accredited museums that have staffs of six to 15 people, again the largest category. Overall, the Cape Fear Museum is representative of many local and regional history museums, making the recommendations found here more broadly applicable.

However, the Cape Fear Museum is also unique. Its founding by the United Daughters of the Confederacy makes it different from the majority of museums. The UDC had a very specific mission, to honor the Confederacy and uphold the Lost Cause. The United Daughters of the Confederacy founded at least a handful of museums, with the Museum of the Confederacy, the

---

Alabama State Department of Archives and the Cape Fear Museum being three examples of museums that began with collections of Confederate relics gathered by the UDC. The UDC has also sponsored displays of artifacts in government buildings and other exhibition spaces. The initial focus on the Civil War created male-centric collections and male-centric military collections continue to be considered by the collections department staff as some of the museum’s strongest as evidenced in a planning document listing “excellent collections we own.” Chapter One explores this collecting history and its gendered dimensions in more detail.

Even as the Cape Fear Museum is unique, other museums with a history of male-centered collecting, including those focused on military experiences and other traditionally masculine topics, may also have developed imbalanced collections and may find the analysis of the Cape Fear Museum’s collections policies and planning useful for helping to even out their own approaches to collections.

The museum’s location in the city of Wilmington, a city with a racially-charged history including the 1898 Race Riots and the Wilmington Ten, is also important to consider. The Race Riots of 1898 were the only successful coup d'état in United States history, in which white Democrats overthrew a Fusionist government consisting largely of black and white Republicans. The overthrow of the government was also accompanied by violence and forced removal of many prominent black citizens from Wilmington. The Wilmington Ten were a group of 10 people, nine of which were young African American men, who were arrested in the wake of

40 “Collecting Plan Notes,” circa 2010, Collections Planning files, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.
violence, protests, and tension following the integration of the city in 1971.\(^{42}\) The museum’s focus on race perhaps stems from the trauma of its local history and an effort to correct past misrepresentations of African Americans. Collections planning activities in the late 1980s and early 1990s emphasized the need to collect items relating to African American history while the most recent draft of the collecting plan continues to outline the importance of “the story of Lower Cape Fear Ethnic/Religious Cultures” without making explicit mention of the importance of women’s experiences or gendered understandings of men’s or women’s lives.\(^{43}\) The exhibits similarly make great efforts to include topics such as slavery and segregation and point out the effects of race on lived experience. The same is not done with regards to gender.

However, this focus on racial history is not unique to the Cape Fear Museum or Wilmington area. Public historians have recently been focusing on race at the expense of gender. This can be most clearly seen in the American Association for State and Local History’s new *Interpreting* series. Books on interpreting Native American history, slavery, and African American history are present, but not a book on interpreting women’s history. There is also a book on interpreting LGBT history; however, women’s history cannot be lumped into discussions of interpreting sexuality. Similarly, national conferences in the field of public history offer many more sessions on issues of race in public history than gender. AASLH’s most recent conference in St. Paul, Minnesota included three sessions on Native American history in public history, three sessions on slavery, and two on race more broadly applied. In contrast, there was only one session pertaining to women’s history. The 2014 National Council on Public History


conference similarly demonstrated the skewed priorities in public history with five sessions regarding race or African American history, three regarding civil rights, one on slavery, and one on Native American history. Only one session dealt specifically with women’s history. Overall these publications and conferences demonstrate that more emphasis is currently being placed on the interpretation of race than of gender. The interpretation of topics such as slavery, racism, and other similar subjects is extremely important; however, women’s history has similarly been ignored in the past and should be interpreted in tandem with race. Race, class, and gender can be integrated in interpretation as they were in lived experience.

The methods described above, including the collections assessment, exhibits evaluation, resource evaluation, and visitor survey were used to determine the Cape Fear Museum’s current representation of women’s history, possible hindrances to its further incorporation, and the available resources and potential strategies to improve its exhibitions and collections in order to present a more complicated and balanced account of women’s history in the Cape Fear Region.

Chapter One critiques the current permanent exhibition, arguing that the museum’s current focus on race could benefit from an interpretation that includes gender analysis and further exploration of women’s lives, which would also appeal to the museum’s audience. It also explores the challenges and potential approaches to interpreting women’s history based on a walk through the exhibits. It suggests ways that the museum could improve its interpretation of women by being more inclusive, more critical, and more varied in its approach to interpreting women.

---

Chapter Two explores the Cape Fear Museum’s collections, searching for artifacts relating to women’s experiences and determining the role of past collecting in the creation of the limited view of women that is presented at the museum. It also advocates for increased research of women’s history and the collection and explores potential changes in cataloging and planning policies that could make objects relating to women’s history more accessible and better understood.

Chapter Three explores the necessary considerations for an actual proposed new exhibit at the museum on women’s work. It outlines the necessary steps in determining how to present women’s history in a separate, temporary exhibit, rather than integrated into the permanent exhibition. By being temporary and physically separate it will perpetuate the notion that women’s history is not as central to the history of the Lower Cape Fear region. However, this proposed new exhibit has some practical advantages in terms of cost and time and could still highlight the diversity of women’s experiences and take a critical look at the gendered dimensions of work. The chapter draws on the resource evaluation conducted, as well as the visitor survey, to outline the potential for the Working Women exhibit.

I argue that museums can and should improve their interpretation of women’s historical experiences because of the potential to enrich and broaden current interpretations, to engage with women visitors and appeal to visitors’ interests, and to connect to relevant issues of the present. While many scholars point out the need for improved interpretation of women’s history or celebrate successful examples, this work outlines specific steps toward improving women’s history interpretation through exhibition and collections practices. These steps will make better use of the wealth of resources available in order to enhance and present a richer interpretation.
CHAPTER 1: BEYOND INCLUSION: EVALUATING EXHIBITS FOR WOMEN’S HISTORY

An evaluation of the Cape Fear Museum’s permanent exhibition revealed missed opportunities to present a critical interpretation of women’s history. The existing cursory interpretation of women’s history stands in stark contrast to the rich potential found in the museum’s permanent collection, which includes artifacts relating to various aspects of women’s lives. Evaluating the current exhibition for women’s history points out gaps in the interpretation as well as opportunities to present a more detailed or in-depth interpretation of women’s experiences. This exhibit evaluation draws on the museum’s rich collection, secondary material, local primary sources, visitor evaluation of the museum’s visitors, and some interpretive strategies from the field of public history in order to explore the Cape Fear Museum’s current interpretation of women’s history. It outlines some of the challenges to further inclusion and engagement with women’s history, the benefits and importance of interpreting women’s history, and some of the potential strategies for interpreting women’s history more critically.

The current permanent exhibit at the Cape Fear Museum, Cape Fear Stories, does not offer a well-rounded interpretation of women’s historical experiences. There are some sections of the exhibit suffering from the almost complete exclusion of women’s experiences. When women are included, the interpretation does not contextualize individual women’s experiences. The current exhibit does not represent the variety of women’s experiences, with early eras

---

45 Cape Fear Stories, permanent exhibition, Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina. The permanent exhibition as it stands currently was installed at various points between 1992 and 2010. The first section, “Land of the Longleaf Pine,” which traces the region’s history from pre-European contact through the Revolutionary War, was installed in 2010. With that installation came a few changes to the existing nineteenth century gallery which remained from 1992. The twentieth century gallery was added in 2003-2004 with some changes made in 2006 after a leak was addressed.
focusing more on women’s domestic lives and later eras almost exclusively on their public roles rather than exploring both across time. Additionally, the exhibit does not use gender as a lens through which to understand either women’s or men’s lives.

A myriad of factors contribute to the state of the current interpretation. The interpretation of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum is limited by the museum’s interpretive focus on race, the lack of scholarship on local women’s history, limited primary sources by or about women for the earliest eras, the museum’s approach to label writing for all topics, and practical considerations such as staff time and exhibit space.

One challenge to interpreting women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum is the museum’s current focus on race as the primary category of analysis. The exhibit regularly explores how life differed for African Americans in the Cape Fear region, exploring slavery, Reconstruction, and segregation in relative detail. This focus clearly presents race as a major determinant of the lived experience for all. However, the same is not done with gender, for either men or women. The interpretation of racial diversity, tension, and discrimination is a crucial and valid interpretive focus, especially in light of Wilmington’s well-known tumultuous history.46

However, this focus could benefit from further inclusion of women’s history and the addition of the lens of gender to that of race. For example, the interpretation of the 1898 Race Riots and the role of African-American newspaper editor Alexander Manly misses a crucial connection between race and gender. Alexander Manly published an editorial in his paper, the *Daily Record*, defending African American men against the stereotype of rapists of white women, arguing that it was “no worse for a black man to be intimate with a white woman, than

46 For more on Wilmington’s Race Riot of 1898, see LeRae Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Office of Archives and History), 2009.
for a white man to be intimate with a colored woman.”^47 The fact that Manly’s editorial on the subject of interracial relationships and his argument against the double standard commonly applied was enough of a justification for the initiation of the “riots” points to assumptions about the connections between race and gender. That the museum chose to gloss over the gendered nature of Manly’s editorial points to the fact that the exhibit missed an opportunity to connect race and gender. The museum’s current interpretation vaguely refers to “Manly’s most inflammatory editorial” which “created outrage in the white community,” completely avoiding any mention of the role of gendered assumptions in the conflict. This is just one example of the exhibit’s potential for exploring the connections between gender and race. Other missed opportunities are those in which race is explored without regard to how gender also influenced lived experience. For example, the exhibit discusses slavery mostly in terms of its economic importance in the naval stores industry, in which primarily enslaved men worked. Such a focus leaves little room for interpreting enslaved women’s lives.

The lack of secondary sources on women’s experiences in the region is another challenge to increasing the interpretation of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum. Sources exist on women in North Carolina and women in the South, but no in-depth, current monographs are available on the history of women in the Cape Fear region or the city of Wilmington.^48 Some works on the region’s history in general include small references to women’s experiences, but

---


these provide very minimal interpretation of women’s lives.\textsuperscript{49} Without reliable scholarship to help guide the museum’s research and interpretation of women’s history, these tasks take even more of staff members’ time. A related challenge is the difficulty in finding primary sources written by and about women in the colonial and early republican eras. Nearby repositories, notably that of the North Carolina Room of the New Hanover County Public Library, have no manuscript collections related to women in the colonial period. However, an edited collection of documents by Alan D. Watson does include some of interest to women’s history.\textsuperscript{50}

The museum’s current interpretive approach to objects and labels is another challenge to the interpretation of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum. The current labels emphasize objects as illustrations and use a cursory, “just the facts” approach.\textsuperscript{51} The phrase, “just the facts,” is used by Richard Handler and Eric Gable in their 1997 study of Colonial Williamsburg to describe an approach used to avoid interpreting miscegenation. Interpreters at the site would point to the absence of clear, irrefutable documentation to avoid discussing the high likelihood of miscegenation between white elites and black enslaved or free workers. Handler and Gable found that this approach prevented a critical interpretation and “erode[d] the message of the new social history.”\textsuperscript{52}

While the Cape Fear Museum is not avoiding interpreting women’s history, its perfunctory labels limit the breadth of the interpretation by merely stating dry facts about objects. The labels accompanying objects report only the most straightforward of facts, avoiding

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Alan D. Watson, editor, \textit{Society in Early North Carolina: A Documentary History}, (Raleigh, NC: Division of Archives and History, NC Department of Cultural Resources), 2000.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 78.
\end{itemize}
opportunities to explain possible connections between specific objects and larger themes. At the Cape Fear Museum, the consciousness or intent behind the use of factual, cursory labels is not at issue; however, the result is the same as that found at Colonial Williamsburg. The labels’ lack of context, connections to larger themes, or informed speculation about artifacts when little is known for sure prevents further exploration of women’s history at the museum. For example, a photograph displayed in the museum’s twentieth century gallery shows three Piedmont Airlines planes at the Wilmington Airport in 1952. The accompanying label shares when the airline was established and its first flight. It then reads, “The first flight attendants were male because they handled baggage and opened and closed the 100-pound doors. Female attendants were hired in 1962.” The label goes no further to explain perhaps why women were hired at that point. Perhaps no sources explicitly explained why the airline changed its policy. However, informed speculation about changes in airlines or changes in occupational choices for women could have added to the interpretation even if it admitted that the exact answer was not known. This is just one example of how a label stops short of critical interpretation. All of the challenges above recur in the permanent exhibition and will be explored in the walkthrough of the permanent exhibition below.

Despite the challenges to interpreting women’s history, the Cape Fear Museum could benefit from increasing and deepening its engagement with women’s experiences. Women’s history is an important interpretive goal, and, as pointed out in the Introduction, visitors are interested in learning more about women’s history. Some public historians and educators have suggested that female visitors would feel more connected to the past if they can see themselves

---

53 Cape Fear Stories, Permanent Exhibition, Cape Fear Museum.
The representation in museums of the various activities and experiences of women might also help both boys and girls see women as equal actors in the past. One 1997 study of children’s imaginings of the past suggested that both boys and girls see the past as “inhabited by fewer women than men.” Researchers asked students to illustrate various scenes of the past described with gender neutral language. They hypothesized that there would be gender bias and children would be more likely to draw members of their same sex. However, instead, both boys and girls drew more men than women in the proposed scenes. Girls were also more likely to draw family units or couples even when instructed to draw single figures. The authors found that “in girls' minds, women in history are blurry figures; in boys' minds, they are virtually invisible. On historical grounds, this finding constitutes a serious misrepresentation.” They argued that the importance of women’s history needed to be better represented in classrooms and textbooks as more than sidebars or contributory history.

More information on women’s history would also appeal to visitors’ demonstrated interests. The results of the visitor survey conducted at the Cape Fear Museum present evidence of high levels of visitor interest in women’s history. Women’s average interest level of 4.45 indicates that seeing the history of people they can relate to is important. The nine men surveyed,

---

56 Ibid, 182.
57 Ibid.
however, also came up with an average interest level of 3.1, indicating general visitor interest in women's history.

Furthermore, when asked if they would like to see the Cape Fear Museum specifically include more information on women’s lives, fifteen visitors gave an affirmative answer; only two visitors gave negative responses and three visitors were unsure. Of those fifteen visitors who wanted to see more about women’s lives, ten were women and five were men. Those who did not want to see more were both men and two out of the three who were unsure were men. Only one person described their impression of the museum’s current interpretation as “balanced” while most others were able to name topics they would like to know more about or were not included in the museum, such as women in science, suffrage movement, politics, and childrearing.

When asked to give words or images they associated with women’s history visitors commonly spoke about women’s suffrage, women’s rights, and specific notable women from history. Also noted often were women’s accomplishments and how women’s lives had changed over time. However, when asked to give words or images they associated with the word gender, most visitors felt unsure or simply stated “male/female” or “men/women,” indicating some confusion around the concept of gender. Based on the findings of the survey, visitors would benefit from exhibits that discuss the daily lives of both men and women and explain how ideas about gender informed these lives as well as how those ideas changed over time.

There are some strategies from the field of public history that could help the Cape Fear Museum to appeal to its visitors’ interest in women’s history while addressing some of the challenges it faces in bringing more women’s history into the larger narrative. In his National Council on Public History presidential address Robert Weyeneth identified a strategy that could
be used in order to aid in the interpretation of women’s history in spite of the challenges and limitations in sources. He proposed “pulling back the curtain” to expose historical processes to visitors, sharing with them how decisions were made and why some stories are included and others are not. This strategy could be useful for any topic, allowing visitors to understand how historians arrive at their conclusions, the process of interpretation, and the many different sources of evidence that historians draw upon.

Several scholars have applied Weyeneth’s proposal to projects dealing with the interpretation of difficult subjects, such as LGBT history. Susan Ferentinos discussed the method in both a blog post on NCPH’s Public History Commons and in her presentation on “Pulling Back the Curtain” at the 2015 NCPH Annual Meeting. Ferentinos focuses on pulling back the curtain in order to interpret LGBT history, but also alludes to its usefulness in interpreting women’s history. She argued that the nature of LGBT history lends itself well to the proposed strategy, explaining that, “When interpreting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) history, we can scarcely do anything but display the messy underpinnings of our work. With regard to same-sex love and desire, sound evidence and clear-cut categories rarely exist. In place of definitive statements, usually the best we can offer is a scant handful of clues.” She cited problems of scant evidence due to stigma, incrimination, or scandal that resulted in “maddeningly circumspect” records or the destruction of records. These issues mean that in the interpretation of LGBT history at sites and museums, some amount of informed speculation is

60 Ibid.
often involved and so it is important to explain to visitors what evidence exists and how it has been interpreted.

Ken Turino echoed these thoughts when he wrote about Historic New England’s efforts to interpret one of their historic houses as the home of a gay man.61 Turino described how the site changed its interpretation when new oral history evidence came to light. “Discussing with visitors the lack of conclusive written evidence, the oral history provides a prime opportunity on the tours to illustrate the detective work historians do to understand the past. We piece together clues, respond to gaps in the historical record, and use newly discovered materials to answer questions.”62

In the case of lesser-known histories where fewer sources have been preserved over time or less importance was placed upon them, this process of “pulling back the curtain” can explain why little can be definitively known. In the case of women’s history, instead of leaving those sections unpopulated by women, museums can offer an opportunity to let visitors form their own conclusions based on the available evidence. It can likewise be useful for museums that primarily interpret particular locales or regions and find a dearth of primary or secondary source materials relating to women’s history in their locale. What is known? What can possibly be inferred from other places? What isn’t known and why? What does that tell us about the past? In the case of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum, this strategy might lay out the little evidence that does exist on women in Wilmington’s earliest eras. It could also aid in filling gaps in regional specific knowledge by allowing visitors to compare Wilmington’s women’s history to

62 Ibid.
that of other regions that have more documentation. The approach could also lead to new methods of label writing that allow the visitor to form their own conclusions, make connections, and better understand the historical process.

Exposing process to visitors is largely a strategy that can aid in combating lack of sources and inclusion of women’s history. Beyond just including more about women, however, is making sure a balanced, critical interpretation of women is produced. Laura Brandon argued for interpreting the “total woman” in her article the Canadian War Museum’s approach to women’s history. Brandon referred to the specific need to interpret the lives of women who were directly involved in war through service in the military or as field nurses and the lives of women on the home front. The latter was often overlooked at the museum.63 While Brandon focused only on the interpretation of war, we can expand the definition of the total woman to include the “average” women participating in traditionally female-gendered activities as well as “notable” women who work or live outside of the traditional gender norms in one or more ways. Women’s domestic roles and their public roles can both be interpreted and placed in context. Likewise, a picture of the total woman should include multiple viewpoints from women of different races, classes, and other varying circumstances. By keeping these points in mind and applying them to the permanent exhibition, the Cape Fear Museum can create an interesting, critical interpretation of women’s history.

There are both benefits to interpreting more women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum and challenges to doing so. However, new approaches to women’s history can help not only the Cape Fear Museum but also other museums that aim to interpret women’s history in a

---

meaningful way. Such approaches include looking at sources in new ways, revealing process to
visitors, and including all aspects of women’s lives. A walk through and evaluation of the current
permanent exhibition reveals the effects of the challenges to interpreting women’s history on the
Cape Fear Museum and offers the opportunity to apply strategies and approaches as well as
outline the available resources for interpreting women’s history in the Cape Fear Region.

The museum’s representation of women’s history is not evident immediately upon
entering. The first area visitors to the museum see is an introductory wall to Cape Fear Stories
that features several perspectives on Wilmington and the Cape Fear Region. One of these
perspectives is from a woman, Janet Schaw. A voice recording brings Schaw’s words to life,
describing her first impressions of the region. However, Schaw’s identity as a woman is not
explicitly discussed, neglecting to explain how her experience of travel, motivations for coming
to Wilmington, and life upon arrival might have been affected by being a woman. Granted, her
male counterparts’ lives are not explored through a gendered lens either. This inclusion of a
woman’s perspective, however, does not set a precedent for the rest of the permanent exhibition,
parts of which exclude women’s history entirely.

Also in the lobby is a small display about the founders of the museum, the United
Daughters of the Confederacy. This case explains a little about what the UDC did and highlights
a few women, including Eliza Nutt Parsley, one of the founders, who knitted clothes for soldiers
at home during the Civil War; Rose O’Neal Greenhow, a Confederate spy who drowned when
her ship ran aground at Wilmington; and Lena Beery, who managed the history and relics
committee of the UDC. While this particular display is woman-centric, it misses opportunities to
explore why a women’s organization began the museum in the first place. The United Daughters
of the Confederacy’s efforts at memorialization represented one of the gendered expectations of
elite white women. These women worked to memorialize and preserve the history and morals of their society in an extension of their domestic roles. As Patricia West points out in her analysis of the house museum movement that began with Mount Vernon, “preservation of historic ‘shrines’ was appealing to conservative as well as activist women because it was consistent with women’s private, domestic role and because it was part of a wider pattern of nineteenth-century social reform.”\(^{64}\) While she explicitly discussed built structures, the same could be said for a group of women working to preserve Confederate relics. Caroline E. Janney made this point in her analysis of the Ladies’ Memorial Association, an organization predating the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Janney explored its role in the creation and propagation of the South’s Lost Cause ideology and its attempts to preserve a mythologized way of life in the Old South.\(^{65}\) The lobby display could have explored the role of the UDC or the individual roles of the women profiled in terms of gendered assumptions in order to connect the Cape Fear Museum’s history to a larger history of women’s work in cultural preservation.

These first representations of women that visitors see in the museum, despite being early inclusions of women, demonstrate that the interpretation of women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum falls short. These first glimpses at the museum’s interpretation of women foreshadow the rest of the permanent exhibit’s approach to women. While the museum includes women, at least in some sections of its exhibits, these inclusions are cursory, lack context, and miss opportunities to explore women’s lives both critically and deeply.

When visitors leave the lobby, they enter the beginning of the main permanent exhibition, which proceeds chronologically. The first section addresses Native American life before

\(^{64}\) West, 2.

colonization, early settlers of the Wilmington area, the main colonial economic activities, and the causes and effects of the American Revolution. The first problem in the Cape Fear Museum’s interpretation of women is lack of representation in all areas and eras. Women are either missing or severely underrepresented in several sections of the museum’s permanent exhibit, namely those depicting the earliest years of Wilmington’s history from colonial Wilmington through the Revolutionary era. These sections demonstrate the continued lack of inclusion of women’s perspectives and lives. As demonstrated in the introduction, public historians have been calling for more equal representation and inclusion of women for decades and while some think it might be time to push beyond mere inclusion, equal representation in museums is a crucial first step.

In a brief introduction to Native American life prior to colonization there is no mention of women or differentiation in experience by gender. This “First People” section of the exhibition, however, also offers very little in terms of specifics about the people who lived in the Cape Fear region before it was colonized by Europeans. The exhibit does not even give a name for the people who populated the region prior to the arrival of Europeans. However, despite the lack of knowledge about these people, the exhibit might have described how archaeologists and historians investigate gendered behaviors through artifacts and other archaeological methods, especially since the exhibit features descriptions of how evidence is found and put together along with an interactive pottery fragment activity.

Following the brief introduction to the area’s Native American people, the exhibit continues on to the section entitled “A Society Forms,” which introduces the major role slavery played in the development of the region. The section also offers an example of difference by class by explaining that earthenware pottery was used by upper-class families in the kitchen but by the lower-class households for dining. However, this section does not explain how lives
differed because of gendered expectations and does not mention women at all. This section begins the pattern that continues throughout the rest of the permanent exhibition, that of race, and sometimes class, figuring more prominently in the interpretation of the region’s history than gender. While it is important for these topics to be considered, placing them in the context of gender would enrich the interpretation and lead to a more complete history.

The exhibit continues to describe Wilmington’s growth over the colonial period, focusing on economic activities in Wilmington including the production and export of naval stores, the role of merchants, and Wilmington’s connections to trade across the Atlantic. The largest focus of this colonial section of the exhibit is on the use of enslaved labor in the naval stores industry. This focus concentrates on the activities of enslaved men and how they fit into the region’s economy, obscuring the roles of both enslaved women and free women in the production of goods and in the local economy. Furthermore, the focus on economic activity leaves less room for discussion of social and cultural history, history of the family, and other topics that offer more opportunities for discussing women’s roles. Primary sources exist that could help interpret the relationships between men and women, marriage, divorce, and relationships between masters and female servants. Alan Watson’s *Society in Early North Carolina: A Documentary History* contains a 1788 column from the *Wilmington Centinel* describing how women choose their husbands and a *Wilmington Centinel* notice submitted by Matthew Johnson declaring that his wife had “absented herself from her supposed husband’s lawful commands,” and numerous resources relating to other aspects of women’s lives and relationships from other similar North Carolina towns.66

---

There is only one mention of a woman in this prerevolutionary section and it is within an interactive feature. A touch screen device allows visitors to explore documents and what they tell us about individuals living in colonial Wilmington. One of the options is a document detailing a charge to a woman’s account with the merchants Robert and John Hogg. Nan Corbin’s account was charged for purchases of molasses and rum. The interactive feature explains what several of the notations on the document mean, indicating that Nan’s daughter picked up the goods and charged the account rather than paying in cash. The interactive feature also explains that the items purchased from the merchants are those needed to brew small beer. Nan’s account also showed the repetitive purchasing of the same items indicating that Nan was probably running a tavern.

While the interactive feature concedes that little else is known about Nan, it misses out on the opportunity to contextualize Nan Corbin in the larger story of women’s occupations in the colonial era. In an exhibit focusing on the economic aspects of colonial life, women’s participation in the market should be included. The exhibit gives no indication of how common it was for women to be tavern keepers. Keeping taverns was a relatively common job for women in the colonial period. Women could take in boarders or keep taverns, inns and coffeehouses because these occupations related to women’s domestic skills of hosting, cooking, and keeping house. While women more commonly remained in the home than participated in public occupations, such jobs were acceptable since they fell within the realm of a woman’s domestic duties.67 Without this context, visitors might not know whether Nan Corbin was typical of colonial women or an aberration. Women’s home-based positions as domestic workers,

governesses, and seamstresses, as well as their tasks in home production could likewise be included in telling the economic narrative of colonial Wilmington. Additionally, women’s legal and political standings could be explained through their economic roles. Single women, widows, and those whose husbands faced economic difficulty were often more likely to work in others’ homes, operate businesses, such as boarding houses or taverns, or take work, such as sewing or washing, into their own home. This phenomenon shows most women’s economic and legal dependence on their husbands.68

While admittedly the resources on women’s lives specific to the Cape Fear Region are few, the exhibit could apply Roberth Weyeneth’s call for museums to pull back the curtain and acknowledge the challenges to understanding women’s lives, explain what is known, what is known from other locations, and allow visitors to draw their own conclusions based on the available evidence. This method of explaining how the limited sources relating to women’s lives are found and used to piece together history could be applied throughout, helping to explain gaps in the historical record and that less is concretely known about women, especially in the earliest eras of the Cape Fear Region’s history.

As the exhibit moves forward in time to the Revolutionary War, specific women are increasingly mentioned; however, women continue to be underrepresented and presented without much context. Specific women’s stories are cited, but an understanding of what most women’s lives were like in the Revolutionary War is not presented. In one interactive display, visitors are presented with five viewpoints on the Revolutionary War ranging from Patriot to Loyalist. Only one of the five perspectives is that of a woman. The woman profiled is an enslaved woman

68 Ibid, 19.
chosen to represent one of the possible views of the enslaved residents of Wilmington. Another woman is mentioned together with her husband. Anne Clark Hooper is lumped together under the profile of her husband. This interactive display minimizes women’s agency and the possibility that women did not always agree politically with their husbands. It also neglects to present the fact that women’s opinions would also have been influenced by their race and class, with white women having a very different opinion than the one enslaved woman depicted. While this activity offers insight into how race and class status affected colonists’ political leanings, it does not examine how gender may have influenced some.

Likewise women are excluded from a panel describing how local people protested British actions such as the Stamp Act. The panel uses primarily gender-neutral terms, but presents the resistance of the Sons of Liberty who “marched in the streets…defied the royal governor and forced the local stamp collector to resign.”69 Women were less likely to take part in public protests or marches; however, they made political statements by boycotting British goods such as tea and cloth.70 Some educated women also took advantage of revolutionary rhetoric to begin writing more about politics and expressing their opinions.71

This section of the exhibit on the Revolutionary War also neglects to explain the specific ways in which the war affected those residents who remained in Wilmington. While the exhibit does give a young girl’s cipher as an example of how the war “made a mark on people’s daily lives,” it neglects to explain how the war specifically affected the daily lives of residents,

---

69 *Cape Fear Stories*, permanent exhibition.
70 Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 70.
71 Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*. 

42
especially women. The effects on men are offered more explicitly through descriptions of men’s participation in protests, government, and battles.

Like the rest of the permanent exhibit, the interpretive priorities are the economy and slavery. When describing how the war affected daily life the exhibit explains the prevalence of runaway slaves and white residents’ fear of slave revolts. However, scant information is given as to how the war affected women other than the brief mention of young Martha’s cipher. War caused many women to take over their husbands’ farms and businesses. Boycotts and shortages also placed more of a burden on women to produce necessary household goods and make do with what was available. These potential aspects of life in colonial Wilmington are missing. Local evidence of women’s involvement in colonial- or early Republic-era politics may be difficult to find; however, the lack of specific examples does not mean that women’s roles should be overlooked.

While sources about, and especially by, women are harder to find in this early era, they do exist. Where they do not exist for specific locations, some idea of these women’s lives could be inferred from colonial sources from similar towns and from the many secondary sources about women’s lives in the Colonial South. Such information specifically about Colonial and Revolutionary life in Wilmington is available. Alan Watson’s *Society in Early North Carolina: A Documentary History* includes numerous transcribed and contextualized excerpts of primary source documents from Wilmington and other towns in North Carolina. The highlighted primary sources attest to women’s lives through topics such as marriage, including the pre-marriage contract between Wilmington residents John Burgwin and Margaret Haynes designed to protect

\[72\] Ibid.
her assets; mistreatment of female servants and slaves; women’s occupations, including tavernkeepers; the education of girls; and leisure activities.\textsuperscript{73} Cynthia A. Kierner uncovered a story of Wilmington women’s involvement in the politics of the Revolution. Her study, \textit{Southern Women in Revolution}, found that a group of twenty-one Wilmington Whig women petitioned the governor in 1782, making a case for Loyalist women and children. The petition was an effort to keep the Loyalist women from being removed from the city. It is representative of one of the few, formal ways in which women sought change in government or politics.\textsuperscript{74}

The Cape Fear Museum also has several colonial-era artifacts that could be used to flesh out the interpretation of Colonial and Revolutionary women’s history. The museum’s collection only holds about 300 objects from the colonial period, but some could be useful to discuss women in the colonial period. A 1776 cup and saucer and a colonial-era tea table could be used to discuss elite women’s leisure time as well as women’s participation in the boycott on tea, as something else would have been drunk from the cup of a Patriot woman.\textsuperscript{75} Cookie cutters and a dinner plate from the colonial period also offer opportunities to explore women’s domestic roles of baking, cooking, and food production and preparation while a beer bottle and a tankard offer jumping off points to discuss women’s occupations as tavern keepers. A Bible from 1768 could also offer insight into women’s roles as moral educators of their children and households, including enslaved members. Eliza Burgwin Clitherall spent two hours each morning teaching reading, writing, and catechism to her two daughters Eliza and Emily. She wrote of her ability to

\textsuperscript{73} Alan D. Watson, editor, \textit{Society in Early North Carolina: A Documentary History}, (Raleigh, NC: Division of Archives and History, NC Department of Cultural Resources), 2000. See also \textit{Early New Hanover County Records}, \textit{Early American History: Colonial Women and Domesticity}, \textit{A Few Unsung Women: Colonial and Pioneer, Liberty’s Daughters}


\textsuperscript{75} Cup and saucer, 1981.055.0001, Tea Table, 1992.139.0001; Cookie Cutter, 1962.059.0001; Dinner plate, 1991.083.0005; Beer bottle, 1991.003.0006; Tankard, 2008.060.0003.
do so because of “‘having excellent servants, & a good sempstress [sic], I had abundance of time to devote to my precious children without neglecting my family domestic duties.’” 76 While the specific stories attached to some of these objects may not be known, these artifacts could be approached with a new perspective, one that seeks to uncover what the artifact can demonstrate and showcase what is known about women’s lives in the Cape Fear region.

As the exhibition continues toward the nineteenth century, women’s objects and stories are included more often; however, they remain minimized and out of context. Instead, the few women’s stories or objects that are included are placed alongside men’s as examples of major themes in the history of the Cape Fear region without comparing how men’s and women’s lives differed. For example, in a section detailing how the growth of the local economy influenced households, a number of personal goods are given as examples of the items residents purchased and owned. Many of these items belonged to women; however, their gendered meanings are not included.

The section mentions various activities that happened in the home, such as “cooking, eating, or reading” and points to the items that were used to “produce handiwork and other fabric crafts.” 77 The display includes items such as Lucy Melvin’s mortar and pestle, Sarah Jane Beery’s sugar spoon, Sarah A. Bowden’s cotton carder, Ann Eliza Williams Beery’s jewelry, a tatting shuttle, a crochet hook. Some of these women are identified further only by giving their husband’s name or occupation. These inclusions of women miss opportunities to discuss the gendered division of labor within the home, gendered expectations of roles, tasks, and behavior, and even basic explanations of the tasks performed in the home. Many of the objects in the

76 Quoted in Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 175.
77 *Cape Fear Stories*, Main Exhibit, Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, NC, viewed June 2014 and February 2015.
display lack clear explanations of function. Who would have been using a cotton carder and for what purpose? Answering basic questions such as these could expand visitors’ understanding of women’s tasks.

This lack of contextualization for women’s lives is again found in a section on nineteenth-century Wilmington businesses and occupations. The text mentions seamstresses and washerwomen among other examples of work but does not give specific examples of women working in these occupations nor does it contextualize how many women would have held these jobs. A washboard on display is accompanied by a label reading, “It was hot, backbreaking work, and those who could afford to do so, hired others to do their laundry or used slave labor.”

This interpretation of the washboard ignores nineteenth-century gendered division of labor. For those who could not afford to hire or use slave labor, who did the arduous task of laundry? Laundry and many other household tasks were done by women. The exhibit neglects to explain that the majority of women worked in the home. Also, while the exhibit mentions jobs such as seamstress and washerwomen, it leaves out women’s other professions and the fact that some women were entrepreneurs who ran boardinghouses, millineries, and dressmaking shops. Overall, the exhibit fails to depict a complex picture of women’s lives, only mentioning stereotypical roles, neglecting to explain how gendered expectations affected women’s lives, and leaving women’s household duties to be assumed by the audience.

As with the case for inclusion in the colonial and Revolutionary sections of the exhibit, the museum has some resources to interpret these other aspects of women’s lives in the

---

78 Exhibit label.
80 Ibid, 202-203.
nineteenth century. The collection contains items relating to women’s work in millineries, including an 1890 bonnet from the French Millinery Parlors in Wilmington, and women’s cloth production in the home, including a weaving shuttle from about 1900, and a sampler from 1837. These items give insight into women’s work both in and out of the home.

The exhibition’s section on the Civil War also excludes women’s history almost entirely. Rose Greenhow is the only woman named in the sections covering the Civil War. Her story is briefly included on a timeline, stating that she, as a Confederate spy, drowned off the coast near Fort Fisher. The brevity of the Greenhow story suggests visitors are expected to be familiar with her exploits. Its lack of context, however, presents a skewed picture. How often were women spies? What kind of work did Greenhow and other spies carry out? As a rarity, the story of Greenhow as the only specific example of women during the Civil War eclipses the roles of the majority of women.

The one other brief mention of women in the Civil War area of the exhibition gives a glimpse of the more common public task of women. It explains on the timeline that Wilmington women were called upon by a Confederate general to “make cartridge belts and sandbags for the local war effort.”

Another section entitled “Letters Home” offers an opportunity to explore the effects of the Civil War on home life and soldiers. However, the section only features excerpts from men in the field, with no context of life at home. This section represents a missed opportunity to describe home life and the issues facing those waiting at home for these letters.

The almost complete absence of women in parts of the exhibition on the Civil War is particularly glaring in view of the many sources available describing women’s experiences of the

---

81 Exhibit text, Cape Fear Stories.
Civil War. Many women wrote diaries and letters about their experiences of the Civil War.

Several of these diaries have been published and reprinted and are readily available including one by Mary Boykin Chestnut.\textsuperscript{82} While these longer recollections of the war may not have been written by Wilmington women, they can provide valuable insight into the lives of women during the Civil War and provide much needed context, as could the many secondary sources available on the subject.\textsuperscript{83}

Cape Fear-specific resources also exist. Ellen Douglas Bellamy’s memoir, \textit{Back With the Tide} is a well-known source of one female perspective on the Civil War and Reconstruction. She described her recollections of life during the Civil War, the occupation of the Bellamy Mansion in Wilmington, and life after the war. Written years after the incidents she described, Bellamy’s memoir must be carefully used as a source. However, it nevertheless offers insight into one woman’s opinions about the war.\textsuperscript{84} Another short diary, written by Sarah Elizabeth Mercer Taylor, is housed at the New Hanover County Public Library’s North Carolina Room. In it, Sarah Mercer Taylor described her experiences at home, caring for sick family members, and waiting for news from her brother who was fighting in the war. Her anguish, stress, and anxiety about the war as well as other issues can be heard through her words. She provided updates on her brothers fighting in the war, including the news that one had died in battle. She expressed

\textsuperscript{82} Mary Boykin Chestnut, \textit{A Diary from Dixie}, edited by Ben Ames Williams, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1949.


desires for the war to be over while also expressing patriotism for the Confederacy. Such an example of a woman’s experience of the war could make a valuable addition to the museum’s current interpretation of the Civil War.

The museum’s collection also contains items that could be used to tell the story of women’s home front experience during the Civil War. Fabric swatches that made it through the blockade highlight shortages in the Confederacy and homespun clothing indicates the role of women as producers of the items that could no longer be received by trade. A cockade demonstrates Confederate women’s ardent patriotism. The collection also contains documents that shine a light on women’s wartime experiences and opinions. The description of a letter written by Mrs. Hill to Mrs. Armand Young after the war explains that the letter “details General W. H. C. Whiting’s life & explains how the Confederate defeat at Fort Fisher enhanced his demise,” and describes the letter as having been “written on "mourning stationery" of white w/black border in black ink.” Another letter certified that the home of Mrs. C.G. Meares was “occupied as a U.S. Army Hospital from April 2d till May 20th 1865” and that “pay is due the owner, she having received none for said occupancy.” These documents illuminate sacrifices made by women, their opinions on the war, and its effects on their lives.

86 Skirt, 2002.008.0526, woman’s off-white homespun linen-yoollsey, hand-sewn; Mitt, 2002.008.0524, pair of women’s, undyed white cotton; hand knitted with homespun yarn; Sash, 2002.008.0521, silk, red & white center, blue ends with circle of 9 5-pointed stars (Confederate flag), ca. 1865, Brought through blockade, worn by Eliza Myers; Cockade, 2002.008.0092, Secession cockade worn by young Wilmington woman; Cloth fragment, 2002.008.0077, Brought through blockade at Wilmington, NC; Cloth fragment, 2002.008.0098, Swatches of English Fabrics brought through the Blockade in 1864 and sold for $11 and $13 per yard.
87 Letter, 2002.008.0463, ca. 1870.
In the Cape Fear Museum’s permanent exhibition, interpretation of the Reconstruction era includes a section on education and segregation in schools. The exhibit points out that women, both local black women and Northern white women, including Amy Morris Bradley, made up a large portion of teachers in post-Civil War Wilmington. However, this section misses the opportunity to further explore women’s work and roles in education. The emphasis instead is on the differences in education by race.

Women’s domestic roles expanded to the public sphere in the nineteenth century as some women applied domestic skills to occupations outside the home and many upper-class women used their position in moral education, social reform, and involvement in civic societies. While these ideas were prevalent in the early nineteenth century, “the ideology of female benevolence—and thus of a uniquely female morality—persisted into this period [post-Civil War].”89 Teaching also fell under this umbrella of acceptable positions for a woman, adapting women’s nurturing roles and aptitude for moral education. Women long held the role of educator within households, as mentioned in the discussion of colonial women’s roles. American society in the nineteenth century largely saw teaching as an appropriate and beneficial occupation for women in that it “enhances a woman’s maternal, domestic, and civic capabilities.”90 This ideology applied most heavily to Northern white women who came to the South to teach newly freed African Americans during Reconstruction. White and black men and black women also numbered among teachers in the South.91

91 For more on education of African Americans in Reconstruction, including women’s roles in that effort, see Ronald E. Butchart, Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2010.
The section includes numerous artifacts and references to specific women, largely because so many women were teachers; however, it does not explain why teaching was one of the few accepted occupations for women. This example demonstrates the permanent exhibition’s focus on race and is also an example of the missed opportunities at the Cape Fear Museum to interpret women’s history deeply and critically by integrating it with discussions of race. Throughout the current exhibit it can be seen that the history of this region is interpreted in view of the tense history of race relations in the city, a very important and previously neglected area of Wilmington’s history. However, this emphasis on Wilmington’s black and white history obscures other ways in which life differed for various inhabitants and ignores the ways in which gendered expectations affected and was affected by race and class. While each category is useful in isolation, Tanfer Emin Tunc writes in her critique of Matthew Frye Jacobson’s Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race that “race and gender are not ‘two discrete categories’ of observation; rather, they are ‘two categories of difference [that] have worked in tandem…”92 Different gendered expectations were placed on black and white women and men. Racial divides, discrimination, and opportunities were likewise affected and applied differently by gender.

The nineteenth-century sections of the exhibit showcase both limitations facing the museum’s interpretation of women’s history, the inclusion of more women’s stories, lives, and related artifacts, and the creation of a more complicated and in-depth interpretation of women. As the exhibits progress through time, women are included more often, especially in the exhibit areas focusing on the twentieth century. Women’s experiences are usually included through the

---

mention of a specific woman as an example of a larger topic, such as education, work, or wartime in the Cape Fear Region, none of which are explained in terms of their gendered dimensions. Instead, the inclusion of women either creates the feeling that women were equally involved in all aspects of life, or that women’s stories have been added in simply to fill a quota of inclusion.

There is only one example in the exhibit that approaches the use of gender as a category of analysis. In a section on leisure in the twentieth century labeled “Dancing is Encouraged,” gender differences are explained, “for much of the 19th century, most public entertainment attracted men only – it was not considered polite for women to drink alcohol or dance, and the movies had yet to be invented. By the early 20th century restaurants, cabarets, movies, amusement parks, and other venues began to cater to both women and men.” This example begins to explain how life was different for men and women and demonstrates change in gendered expectations over time. However, it does not explain why expectations of women changed in the twentieth century. Kathy Peiss explored the role of dancing in the social lives of working women in her 1986 work, Cheap Amusements, finding that their increasing participation in dancing reflected their increasing participation in the workforce and other public social activities.

The twentieth-century gallery areas are more inclusive of women, but neglect to contextualize women’s lives by race, class, or gender. This lack of context for the specific women represented in the exhibit may prevent visitors from obtaining a clear understanding of

---

93 Cape Fear Stories, permanent exhibition.
women’s lives in this region over time. The kinds of associations that visitors made when asked to describe what they thought when hearing the words ‘women’s history’ suggests that visitors have not grasped a complete understanding of women’s experiences. Visitors named notable and famous women, largely from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the suffrage movement, and accomplishments achieved over time; all of which indicate that visitors do not associate women’s history with the daily lives of ordinary women nor with earlier eras in history.

When asked what they wanted to know more about, visitors mentioned the suffrage movement and notable women leaders in politics, business, and government. Many also expressed an interest in knowing more about change over time, women’s transition from homemakers to the workforce, progress in the Cape Fear Area from the Revolution to present day, and women’s role in the settlement of Wilmington. These responses indicate that women’s activities in the Cape Fear region are not explained in a way that demonstrates change over time and points to the gaps present in the early history of the region as presented in the exhibits. Instead, the visitor may believe the average woman had little to no effect on life in the colonial and antebellum eras, served solely as teachers in the post-Civil War era, and only supported the military as nurses, Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), and members of the American Red Cross, the roles focused on in the twentieth-century gallery space.95

A more balanced interpretation would consider women’s domestic and public roles, as well as ordinary and extraordinary women. Barbara Melosh pointed to the need to interpret women in their domestic roles in the household and in more public or “notable” roles, arguing that museums more often interpret the public roles. She noted specifically that there have been

95 Permanent Exhibition.
less engaging, critical, or in-depth exhibits about women’s domestic lives than there have been about their public roles despite both the abundance of women’s history scholarship on domestic issues and objects related to women’s domestic lives held in museum collections. In examining how museums have made use of, as well as added to the continuing revision of history to include women, Melosh finds that museums have had more success at interpreting women’s public roles, such as political achievements and labor roles outside the home, rather than their domestic lives. This phenomenon is partially due to the driving principle of “finding” women on the same terms as men. Melosh used reviews of several exhibits of both types, those that interpret women’s public roles and those that represent the domestic sphere, to demonstrate that the exhibits of women’s public roles have been more common and more successful in terms of engaging with the available scholarship. Melosh found that the lack of exhibits about the domestic sphere represented a departure from women’s history scholarship, which has produced critical and in-depth work on domesticity including aspects of family, sexuality, and women’s relationships with one another. Those exhibits that do present domestic life of women leave out any reference to subjects related to women’s bodies, sexuality, or domestic conflict. Melosh found only one exhibit that engaged with aspects of both the public and the private realms of women. She considered the exhibit “’A Share of Honour’: Virginia Women, 1600-1945” successful for its inclusion of women’s domestic lives as well as changes in society that allowed for expanded opportunities outside of the home.

Women’s historians working in historic preservation and at historic house museums have also worked to interpret the total woman, advocating for the preservation of not only domestic

97 Ibid, 202-203.
spaces, but also sites of women’s work outside of the home. They have also sought to interpret multiple women’s perspectives through changing the main perspective offered in the house. Jennifer Pustz outlines this approach in her work, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, which focuses on reimagining objects in a house museum from the point of view of the female servants rather than the owners of the home. Others have called for reimagining spaces owned by notable men in order to better understand the lives of the women of the household, including family and servants.

The Cape Fear Museum, while inclusive of women’s history to a degree, does not put women’s experiences or positions into their gendered context. The museum’s current interpretation also neglects to show visitors the difference between typical and atypical experiences, and fails to interpret the full range of women’s experiences. Like the museums considered by Brandon and Melosh, the Cape Fear Museum leans toward the representation of women’s public rather than domestic roles, especially in its interpretation of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Exhibit sections on earlier eras include mention of domestic duties and objects relating to women’s household roles; however, later exhibit sections focus on women’s occupations, involvement in organizations, leisure activities in public venues, and wartime efforts in the field, either as military support or direct aid to soldiers through organizations like the American Red Cross. Their continued roles within the home and family are ignored as well as how major events affected domestic lives.

One prime example is the lack of interpretation of how war, especially World War II, affected women on the home front. Wartime challenges on the home front instead are presented

---

98 See Page Putnam Miller, *Reclaiming History; Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation; Her Past Around Us*.
99 *Her Past Around Us*. 

55
as gender-neutral. While rationing and wartime industries affected and employed both men and women, the particular noted effect on increasing women in the workforce is ignored, as is the fact that many of those left behind to deal with rationing were women.\textsuperscript{100} The Cape Fear exhibits on World War II instead focus on women working at Camp Davis and those who served as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs). The museum’s collection, however, holds artifacts that shed some light onto women’s home front experiences of the war. In addition to the images already on display showing women working at Camp Davis, the collection holds many examples of rationing cards, including those issued to Verna Hatch, a 41-year old woman in New Hanover County in May 1942; Elizabeth Jacobs, a five-year old girl living in Wilmington in 1943; and Willie Mae Pigford, a nineteen-year old woman in Wilmington.\textsuperscript{101} These ration books, especially those issued to adult women, are a window into the trials faced by women on the home front during the war. They offer a starting point for a discussion of how the war affected women at home, forcing them to deal with rationing and important decisions regarding their households.

In addition to interpreting a broader spectrum of women’s lived experiences by aiming to interpret the ‘total’ woman, the Cape Fear Museum could also make better use of the category of gender. One way to do so is to examine what images of women tell us about the societal expectations placed upon women’s roles, experiences, choices, and behavior. This concept has been achieved at other museums through the analysis of women’s clothing. Edith Mayo described a successful exhibit on this topic curated by Melinda Frye at the Oakland Museum in 1972. The exhibit, \textit{Dress for Greater Freedom}, traced changing styles to examine “how women's


\textsuperscript{101} Re:discovery, Cape Fear Museum, (accession numbers needed.)
dress articulated their changing roles in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{102} A recent exhibition at the Missouri History Museum, entitled \textit{Underneath it All}, aimed to “chronicle the history of consumer culture, the societal roles of American women and the ever-changing standard of beauty by examining the changes in women’s undergarments from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.”\textsuperscript{103} Other exhibits have similarly traced changing women’s fashions and connected them to changes in women’s societal roles. The Cape Fear Museum has many articles of women’s clothing and shoes to choose from in order to analyze women’s changing roles and fashions in the Cape Fear Region over time. Such an approach offers an opportunity to showcase gender as a fluid, changing category, with women’s roles being defined differently over time. Similar approaches could also be applied to men. Interpreting gender means looking at the constructions of both masculinity and femininity.

Another way to incorporate gender more directly is to look at how women are portrayed in media images. How women are written about, drawn, or otherwise represented can show a society’s ideal or expectations for women. Many examples of media portrayals of women are available at the New Hanover County North Carolina Room in the Bill Reaves Subject File Collection. This file includes clippings of news reporting about specific women, as well as editorial pieces written about women and advertisements depicting women. Comparing perceptions of ideal women to the lived experiences of actual women can also provide visitors with insight into the effects of gender roles and the ability to defy them. One clipping from 1971 includes two advertisements for women’s clothing, both depicting high-fashion, slender women.


\textsuperscript{103} The Underneath it All exhibit won an award from the American Association of State and Local History and was temporarily featured on their website. A local news source about the exhibit is available here. \url{http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/article_65fa5960-e323-11e2-adf3-001a4bcf887a.html}
One of the advertisements touts a “soft, feminine look” and seeks to appeal to businesswomen by asking women to visit “before [their] next meeting.” Earlier newspapers offer fascinating columns that showcase numerous news pieces about women. One from 1920, entitled “Activities of Women,” recounted news stories from around the world featuring women. One reported on the first policewoman in Maine while another lauded the fact that a woman had been a business manager for seven years. These columns, and other articles about women in the news, offer insight into what society deemed noteworthy about women and some offer opinion pieces as well that shed light on gendered expectations.

The challenges facing further interpretation of women’s history include the lack of secondary and primary sources, related staff time needed to do in-depth research, the important focus on race and related issues of space, as well as cursory, “just the facts labels.” However, by drawing on strategies already in use in the field of public history, such as “pulling back the curtain” and interpreting the “total woman,” the Cape Fear Museum can make good use of its rich collection and other sources to complicate the understanding of women’s lives in the Cape Fear region. The lack of interpretation of women’s history is at odds with the potential found in the rich resources available in the museum’s collection. This exhibit evaluation points out how the wealth of resources available in the museum’s collection can be used to create a more inclusive, critical, and engaging exhibit; however, some of the missed opportunities in the museum’s interpretation may be related to the challenges it faces in understanding and accessing its collections, which are explored in Chapter Two.

---

Other museums striving to interpret women’s history through the lens of gender can apply these steps to their own projects. The Cape Fear Museum, like others, lacks a complete, well-balanced interpretation of women’s history. In some areas, the museum’s interpretation fails to include women, while in other sections women are included but not contextualized. In order to interpret women’s history meaningfully women need to be both represented and placed in context in terms of gender, as well as race and class. The full range of women’s experiences needs to be interpreted, including both domestic and public. Approaching the interpretation of women’s history with these concepts in mind will lead to exhibits that reflect half of the visitors and leave them with a more complete understanding of life in the Cape Fear Region.
CHAPTER 2: FINDING WOMEN IN COLLECTIONS: RESEARCH, CATALOGING, POLICY, AND PLANNING

The importance of artifacts in museum collections has been debated recently in light of the rise of digital technology and the opportunities for placing objects online for visitors to view from anywhere in the world. While acknowledging the potential advantages of making collections digitally accessible, many public historians argue that the value of viewing tangible artifacts in person remains in the “sense of wonder, emotional connection, nostalgia, or witness to history that we feel in the presence of an evocative object…as well as object-rich settings that transport us to another time and place.”¹⁰⁵ Roy Rosenzweig’s and David Thelen’s 1998 foundational study demonstrated that the public ranks museums highest in trustworthiness of information about the past largely because of the perceived “unmediated” experience of seeing “authentic objects from the past.”¹⁰⁶ While displays of artifacts actually represent a great deal of interpretation, the ability of objects to illustrate concepts, encourage visitor discovery and critical thinking, serve as evidence, and help museum audiences to make connections with the past demonstrates the continued need for artifacts representing all histories. In museums striving to better interpret women’s history, it is necessary to determine if the collections contain artifacts relating to women’s lives, what is known about those artifacts, and what may be limiting their use in the creation of a deeper interpretation of women’s history.

As the exhibit evaluation demonstrated, there are objects relating to women’s lives in the Cape Fear Museum’s collection; however, finding these objects in the museum’s database and

understanding their connections to women’s lives prove difficult. Access to the collection is limited by a need for more research of the collection and more thorough cataloging. In addition to the interpretive challenges discussed in Chapter One, these issues in the collections of the Cape Fear Museum are additional variables limiting the current interpretation of women’s history as detailed in Chapter One.

The accessibility of objects relating to women’s lives is limited by a number of factors including previous priorities and foci in the museum’s long collecting history, standard cataloging practices, the need for more research of the collection, and the lack of emphasis placed on women’s history in collections policies and long-term planning documents. All of these factors contribute to incomplete and cursory object and provenance descriptions in Re:discovery. The insufficient research into objects and the resulting incomplete provenances and descriptions are problems across the collection; however, it has an especially adverse effect on access to artifacts relating to lesser-known and less-researched histories, such as women’s. The lack of research leads to cursory catalog entries that miss out on connections to bigger issues, thus making access and retrieval of artifacts relating to women’s history more difficult.

As many museums face similar challenges in improving the interpretation of women’s history, the assessment of the Cape Fear Museum’s collection can serve as an example of an assessment of the collection for artifacts relating to women’s history and offer helpful considerations for improving access to those materials, including possible cataloging and policy changes. By making gender analysis an explicit part of collections policies and planning, museums can acknowledge the gendered dimensions of artifacts in their collections and connect

107 Permanent Collection, Cape Fear Museum, accessed via Rediscovery museum collection software.
objects with women’s lives. Using gender as a lens when researching and cataloguing objects is an important step to better understand those connections. These same steps could also highlight the potential use of artifacts to interpret a number of other topics including the gendered dimensions of objects relating to men’s lives. These practices can make the rich resources of the museum, including those relating to women’s history, more accessible and better able to enrich and expand the museum’s interpretation of Cape Fear history.

The role of collections in twenty-first-century museums has recently been a topic of discussion because of the changing roles of museums from primarily research institutions to educational and community institutions. The availability of digital technologies has also influenced discussions of the role of objects in museums A recent popular trend in the museum field referred to as “A History of XYZ in 123 Objects” has revitalized interest in the power of artifacts in the interpretation of history. Trevor Jones wrote in a 2014 History News article about how the British Museum’s A History of the World in 100 Objects spawned other projects using the same layout, such as The Smithsonian’s History of America in 101 Objects, with the purpose of using “a series of individual objects to tell a larger story.”

Jones argued that this museum meme demonstrated that “objects can play a more important role than simply illustrating history” by providing a “framework that helps us move beyond looking at artifacts as illustrations and instead uses artifacts to convey multiple viewpoints.” Jones’ article was just one example of the recent renewed interest in the power of objects and is part of a larger body of scholarship about museum collections and their changing value and use in today’s modern age.

---

109 Jones, 23.
Steven Conn’s 2010 book, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, also prompted discussion in history museums about the role of artifacts even though Conn focused on ethnographic, science, and art museums. In his analysis of the changing role of objects in museums’ search for relevance, Conn realized that “objects endure. And in that endurance they offer people the simple pleasure of looking at and the thrill of being in the presence of real things, made by human hands through time and across space…Museums filled with objects…offer the opportunity to see things in three dimensions.” He concluded that “museums—some of them anyway—may not need objects anymore, but without objects we all may miss the delights and surprises that come with looking.” His point underscored the ability for visitors to make their own discoveries and gain new insights by looking at the original object for themselves.

Rainey Tisdale tackled the question as it pertained specifically to history museums in her article in *History News*, “Do History Museums Still Need Objects?” arguing that “we need objects now more than ever.” Tisdale provided a summary of a 2008 study of 5,000 visitors to living history sites which showed that these visitors enjoyed connecting with something authentic that gave them a break from their hectic, technology-immersed lifestyles. Tisdale also cited a recent Reach Advisors study of twenty-somethings in which participants reported that the presence of collections online actually increased their desire to see the tangible objects in person and that they continued to see museums as places of reality and “authenticity” due to the presence of artifacts. These recent studies confirmed Thelen’s and Rosenzweig’s findings that museums are the most trusted sources of information on the past because of artifacts’ presence as

---

111 Conn, 57.
113 Tisdale, 19-24.
material witnesses of history.\textsuperscript{114} While the importance of objects has come up for debate in today’s digital age, the ability of objects to serve as tangible witnesses to the past remains an irreplaceable role for artifacts in museums.\textsuperscript{115}

While a number of public historians have shown a renewed interest in the power of objects and argued for the continued relevance and use of artifacts in museums, they recognized the need to change aspects of collections and called for developments in approaches to collecting, cataloging, and using collections. While museums were originally intended almost exclusively to preserve, study, and classify objects, today’s museums have shifted their missions largely to education and meeting audience and community needs.\textsuperscript{116} These revised missions require a new outlook on collections. Many museums’ collections have become more diverse and focused through actively collecting materials representing more groups of people. Many have also limited new acquisitions to only the best pieces in order to meet preservation needs, deaccessioning objects that no longer reflect the mission. Museums try to make larger portions of their collections useful and available to their visitors through special exhibits showcasing parts of the collection, collections-based programming, and digital access to collections online. Despite efforts of some museums, many others, especially museums with small staffs and budgets, have a long way to go in order to make the most use of their collections.

The Cape Fear Museum has applied some of these ideas to its collections including object-based educational programming through the form of traveling trunks supplied to local teachers, a “Collections Selections” rotating exhibition space, and the use of social media and the

\textsuperscript{114} Rosenzweig and Thelen, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{115} MacArthur, 63-65.
\textsuperscript{116} Tisdale, 20, MacArthur, 57-63 and Conn, 56-57.
website to showcase artifacts. These initiatives begin to address issues of research, awareness, and knowledge of the collection as well as access, all steps that can help to uncover objects relating to women’s lives. However, more efforts could be made to better understand what the collection has to offer in terms of women’s history.

The museum has also responded to the need to provide sustainable care to collections by deaccessioning deteriorated pieces or those that no longer fit the museum’s mission. However, the museum also largely refrains from actively soliciting donations, usually only accepting new acquisitions as needed through passive collecting. This form of collecting prevents the museum from taking on items it cannot care for, but it also limits the museum’s acquisitions to only those offered by the community without regard to collecting gaps.

Passive collecting also limits whose history is told by allowing the community members that are most active in museums, usually older, middle-class, white families, to be more represented in collections. Nina Simon discussed both the merits of crowdsourcing in museums and the power of personal objects, making an argument for allowing visitors to contribute and control their museum experiences. When visitors see objects that they own, produce, or contribute themselves they feel a sense of ownership and involvement with the museum. However, in passive collecting, the members of the community that can feel this connection with the museum is limited by the museum’s lack of outreach. The ability to create these connections

---


118 Personal communications with museum employees, May 2014-August 2014.

with visitors should encourage active collecting relationships with all communities in the region. Thus, a completely crowdsourced collection is not ideal.

In light of the importance of artifacts to help visitors connect to the past, the power of artifacts to inspire, and the potential of objects to tell more comprehensive stories, local and regional museums should have artifacts relating to all groups of its inhabitants. Despite the challenges and limitations to women’s history in the collections, the museum has collected a wealth of artifacts relating to women’s lives. The Cape Fear Museum has over 52,000 objects spanning from those representing pre-contact Native American groups through those relating to twenty-first-century life in the Cape Fear Region. A survey of the permanent collection conducted in 2010 classified objects by time period, finding that there were 147 artifacts documenting Native American life in the Paleo, Archaic, and Woodland periods before contact with Europeans, six artifacts from the seventeenth century, 315 from the eighteenth century, 4,728 from the nineteenth century, 44,006 from the twentieth century, and 1,681 objects from the twenty-first century. The collection is clearly strongest in the twentieth century.

An assessment of objects relating to women in the museum’s database, Re:discovery, demonstrated that the Cape Fear Museum’s collection includes many objects of interest that reflect women’s lives, offering a great deal of potential for offering a more complicated and gendered interpretation of women’s history. Images of women in media such as magazines and cookbooks abound, opening up the possibilities for demonstrating how gender ideals placed limitations on women’s lives.

121 “Survey of Permanent Collection by Object Date,” Collections Planning, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum, 2010.
The Cape Fear Museum’s collection contains a variety of women’s garments including corsets, pantalettes, drawers, camisoles, chemise, petticoats, and stockings. These items could be discussed in the context of women’s rights and the dress reform movement; political freedom and freedom of dress and physical movement came with many changes in styles. The large amount of women’s clothing in the collection also offers insight into changing gendered expectations and demonstrate the practical need for different clothing as duties in and out of the home changed.

Other topics represented in some measure in the collection include women’s health, women’s work and businesses, women’s political activities, and women’s involvement in various organizations. From medical instruments used in women’s health to materials from the League of Women Voters, to twenty-first-century campaign materials for local women politicians, as well as the vast amount of material from female-led volunteer organizations such as the Red Cross, the YWCA, and North Carolina Sorosis, the collection has a wealth of artifacts that can be used to examine many facets of women’s lives in the Lower Cape Fear region. The key issue in the case of the Cape Fear Museum’s interpretation of women’s history then is not a lack of artifacts.

While the Cape Fear Museum has many objects related to women’s lives, other museums seeking to interpret women’s history will need to assess their collections. Certain groups have been underrepresented or misrepresented in museum collections due to previous generations’ neglect to preserve items associated with marginalized groups, discrimination and segregation of communities by mainstream museums, and an emphasis on collecting the belongings of notable

---

elites. Like racial or ethnic minorities, women’s stories have been overlooked, stereotyped, or minimized in museums, especially those of ordinary women.  

Recent discussions of collections by public historians and museum professionals have included the need to become more inclusive in their collecting in order to appeal to a larger, more diverse audience. The need to make changes in order to attract new audiences is clear; even as the American population becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, museum attendees continue to be predominantly white. Minorities made up 34% of the American population in 2008 but only 9% of the core museum visitors.

In contrast to the representation of racial minorities, the importance of representing women’s history actually stems from the fact that women do make up half of museum visitors. As mentioned in the introduction, Emily Curran argued in 1992 for the need to increase representation of women since women and girls make up half of the visitors to museums, and more recently the Secretary of the Interior called for recognition of the fact that women make up half of the nation’s population. Eleven out of the twenty visitors surveyed at the Cape Fear

---

123 See Andrea Burns, *Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 2013 for a discussion of the marginalization of African Americans by mainstream museums; Page Putnam Miller, editor, *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women’s History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1992 argues for the need to preserve sites relating to women’s lives as less have been preserved. Past preservation efforts focused on structures relating to notable men.


Museum were women, suggesting that this proportion holds true there as well. An important part of balancing the representation of women is including objects relating to women’s experiences.

One way that museums have sought to appeal to a more diverse audience is to increase diversity in exhibits and programs. Collections are a key component of this effort. A 2005 report by Museums Association in London, *Collections for the Future*, examined new approaches to collections that can help “ensure that more people have more opportunities to engage with museum collections, and that those collections are as rich, diverse and inspiring as they can possibly be.” Some museums, such as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in England, which is profiled in *Collections for the Future*, realized that “cultural diversity must begin with its collections” and recognized the need to assess their collections for their representations of cultural diversity, making sure that racial and ethnic minorities are represented as well as women and institutionalizing these categories as priorities in their collection policies and collecting plans.

While the need for diversity in collections has been widely accepted, there are few resources that outline specific steps for increasing inclusion of women’s history in museum collections. The majority of women’s history literature in public history is by those working in historic preservation and historic sites rather than history museums. Preservationists concerned with women’s history focus on preserving structures representing women’s lives beyond the home and reinterpreting domestic spaces to be more critical and inclusive of women.

---


128 Ibid, 14.

The limited number of studies relating to women’s history and the collections of history museums led me to examine museums that are working to improve the racial or ethnic diversity of their collections for insight into how to ensure collections reflect diversity. Race and gender share some qualities in terms of being underrepresented in museum collections and interpretation. There are similar challenges in collecting objects relating to the histories of racial minorities and women, as both were often neglected in favor of preserving items associated with notable white men.

Collecting materials relating to historically marginalized groups can be challenging. In a 1994 article John Fleming described the challenges of collecting artifacts for the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center’s first exhibit in 1988, explaining that many African Americans had not previously been asked to donate artifacts to a museum. Potential donors for the exhibit did not see museums, which had largely ignored African American history in the past, as places of African American history or memory. Potential donors needed to be educated about the museum’s role in collecting material culture and preserving history.130

Some African American-specific museums met these challenges and were successful because of their explicit connection to local black communities, such as the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, the DuSable Museum of African American History, and the International Afro-American Museum, all of which were formed in the 1960s out of “the spaces carved out by generations of local black community organizations.”131 However, the example of another African American museum points out the detriment of not forming relationships with

---

131 Burns, From Storefront to Monument, 11.
local African American communities. The African American Museum of Philadelphia failed to develop a positive relationship with the local community, black or white, and resulting problems plagued the museum’s early years. Public debate over the museum’s location near Philadelphia’s Society Hill area continued for years after the museum’s opening with current white residents arguing against the museum’s presence there while African Americans pointed to the “deep roots of the African American community in [that] section of the city.”¹³² This “compromised physical location” of the museum made it difficult to form a positive relationship with the city’s African American community.¹³³ The success of museums like the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, as well as realizations like those of John Fleming have led many “mainstream” museums to begin working to make connections with their local African American community members in order to collect items representative of their histories. Museums striving to fill gaps in their collections relating to women’s history can perhaps borrow these strategies.

The Cape Fear Museum has met similar challenges and has actively worked to improve its collection in terms of racial diversity, but not as explicitly in terms of women’s history or gender. The curator of the museum, Barbara Rowe, attended a conference in 1988 entitled “Collecting and Interpreting the History of Cultural Groups” in order to learn about the “unique challenges of collecting and interpreting the cultures of peoples who have been often ignored by scholars and museums and historical organizations.”¹³⁴ Rowe wrote in her application to attend the conference that she hoped to learn how to make contacts in minority communities, how to determine what artifacts should be collected, where to find artifacts relating to minority history,

¹³² Quoted in Burns, 71.
¹³³ Ibid, 12.
¹³⁴ “Collecting and Interpreting the History of Cultural Groups,” brochure, AASLH, Cape Fear Museum, Collections Department, Wilmington, NC.
and how to organize object documentation in order to interpret minority cultures effectively.\textsuperscript{135} She also described recent successful efforts to improve representation of minorities at the museum, citing several exhibitions that included African American history and one that focused on Native American history. In 1991 the museum also sent a list of desired objects to the African American Heritage Commission in an effort to make contact with the local African American community and solicit donations relating to local black history.\textsuperscript{136} The museum does not have a record in its collections planning documents of making the same efforts to explicitly strengthen women’s history as it did for racial minorities.

While racial minorities, such as African Americans and Native Americans, have often been marginalized in mainstream museums because of the absence of minority staff members and lack of participation by their communities due to institutional racism,\textsuperscript{137} women’s involvement in the early years of many museums differs remarkably from minority involvement in mainstream museums in the past. Women have historically been very involved in museums and historic sites as both volunteers and staff members.\textsuperscript{138} In the United States, women were often involved in preservation, museums, and other historical societies as well as charitable and reform organizations, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These roles in

\textsuperscript{135} Barbara Rowe, application to attend conference, 1988, Collections Planning, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum.

\textsuperscript{136} Memo to African American Heritage Commission from Jan Luth, Assistant Director, “Collection Needs for the Museum from the African American Community,” New Hanover County Museum of the Lower Cape Fear, January 18, 1991, Collections Planning, Cape Fear Museum, Collections Department, Wilmington, NC.


organizations were considered appropriate public roles for middle and upper class women and represented women’s position as moral and cultural preservers.¹³⁹

Despite this difference, both groups have suffered from underrepresentation of their histories and some of the approaches to inclusion and diversity that museums have used for strengthening their collections’ diversity can be applied in terms of women’s history as well. As many museums have tried to do with minority communities, those museums seeking to fill gaps in their collections relating to women’s history, or to better interpret the items they do have, could reach out to women in the community in order to solicit artifacts, oral histories, or even to ask about women’s topics women would be interested in seeing more of in the museum. While this tactic is most useful for the twentieth century, an era for which the Cape Fear Museum already has a relatively strong collection, it could provide a better understanding of the objects in the museum’s collection. It is also a useful strategy for museums without materials relating to women’s lives.

While the Cape Fear Museum is an example of a museum having objects relating to women’s history, other museums may find a dearth of artifacts when trying to interpret women’s history. Despite women’s relative involvement in museums as compared to minorities, some historians in museums have found that an absence of necessary objects explains the lack of interpretation of women’s history. Laura Brandon discussed changes needed in collections practices, especially at museums concentrating on stereotypically masculine themes such as war.¹⁴⁰ Such museums’ past collection policies emphasized male-related artifacts and an androcentric view of the war rather than also taking note of women’s experience with war.

¹³⁹ West, 6, 71.
Brandon pointed out in the context of the Canadian War Museum the possibility that women have not always seen “their own material culture relating to war as significant to museum collections even if certain objects remain important to them personally. This may have something to do with the historical undervaluing of their experiences as well as their marginalization from the dominant masculine discourse of war.”\textsuperscript{141} This insight might apply to many domains other than war considered to be that of men. Women often had differing experiences with topics usually reserved for men such as war, politics, or heavy industries. These alternate experiences may not be seen as important because they do not match the dominant narrative, making women less likely to contribute items from their perspective and historians less likely to interpret the objects in the collection in terms of women’s historical experiences.

Like the Canadian War Museum discussed by Brandon, the Cape Fear Museum was limited its collecting of women’s objects because of a focus on traditionally masculine topics such as war. The Cape Fear Museum was founded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in order to honor and preserve Confederate relics, principally those of male veterans. Its next steward, the local chapter of the North Carolina Sorosis Club, another women’s organization, under the direction of the New Hanover Historical Commission, shifted the museum toward a broader, regional focus, collecting anything relating to the history of the Lower Cape Fear region.\textsuperscript{142}

The Cape Fear Museum’s own beginnings as a museum intended to honor and preserve the relics of the Confederacy and the Civil War had an effect on its early collecting activities, delaying the collections’ inclusion of women because of an emphasis on men’s experiences of

\textsuperscript{141} Brandon, 111.
\textsuperscript{142} Janet Davidson, “Museum Mondays,” Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, \url{http://capefearmuseum.blogspot.com/}.
The United Daughters of the Confederacy founded the museum to “collect and preserve relics and objects of historic value and to gather and put on record all incidents of local interest relating to the war.” In an effort to honor Confederate soldiers, the women who created the museum focused on collecting materials related to the actual fighting of the war. The group of women who founded the museum were members of the local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy and they named the “first undertaking of the ‘Cape Fear Daughters of the Confederacy’ [to] be the collection and preservation of Confederate relics and records in a permanent museum for North Carolina.” The woman who served as the main proponent of the museum was Eliza Hall Nutt Parsley. Her husband, William M. Parsley, served in the Confederate Army and died near the end of the war, “just days before Lee surrendered in April 1865.”

These women’s personal connections to men who served in the Confederate Army spurred much of their collecting. They were the relatives and descendants of local Confederate soldiers and wanted to “keep the memory of their loved ones alive, and promulgate the idea that their sacrifice was not in vain.” These women did so by donating items belonging to their husbands, fathers, and sons. Many of the items from the original UDC collection have provenances that indicate female donors of objects owned and used by men. For example, a Confederate cavalry officer’s kepi was donated by his wife in 1901. According to the UDC minute book quoted in the object’s provenance description, “Mrs. Davidson has presented the museum with some valuable papers, and also a cap worn by her husband during the war.”

---

145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
provenance also provides identifying information about Robert Davidson who was a 3rd Lieutenant in Company A of the 41st Regiment of North Carolina troops. A local newspaper also highlighted donations by women of their husbands’ military items. An April 23, 1898 article noted that “Mrs. Kate DeRosset Meares, widow of the late Col. Gaston Meares, presented to the museum her husband’s military hat which he wore during the Mexican war and for some time during the Civil War, before he fell, a martyr in protection of his country’s honor. Accompanying the hat was Col. Meares’ sword.” Some items were donated by veterans themselves and many items from that original collection did not list donors in the provenances; however, it is clear that a majority of the artifacts belonged to men and focused on men’s wartime battle experience with many sabers, uniforms, and other items used in the field found in the collection.

However, despite an emphasis on men’s military experience in the earliest collecting of the museum, items attesting to women’s experiences during the war are also found in the original UDC collection. This presence is due to the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s recognition of women’s roles and sacrifices during the Civil War. Karen Cox’s work, Dixie’s Daughters: the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture, argued that the women of the UDC not only created and promoted the Lost Cause through their work, but that their work “expanded woman’s sphere by playing prominent roles in southern public life, championing the region’s conservative social and racial values, and celebrating the role of Confederate women during the Civil War.” However, in explaining how these organizations

147 Kepi, 2002.008.0264, Permanent Collection, Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Wilmington, North Carolina.
148 Quoted in “Museums at Wilmington, clippings Bill Reaves Collection, 1 of 4,” Cape Fear Museum, Collections Department, Research Files, Wilmington, NC.
expanded women’s activities outside of the home, Cox frames their work mostly as supporting roles for men’s larger legacy of honor in the Civil War. She argues that the UDC “helped to extend women’s domestic role as caretakers into the public sphere as they memorialized dead fathers, brothers, and sons buried in Confederate cemeteries.” While the UDC “firmly held that it was the Daughters’ responsibility ‘to record the part taken [in the war] by Southern women’ as well as to honor Confederate men,”150 the UDC’s recognition of women’s participation in the war still maintained women as supporting actors in the Civil War. However, the UDC’s active efforts to celebrate women’s support of Confederate soldiers did preserve items relating to women’s duties and sacrifices in the war. The Cape Fear Museum’s collection contains knitting needles, homespun clothing, and cloth fragments brought through the blockade. These artifacts show women’s responsibilities in the home, making their own clothing and supplies for themselves, their families, and their soldiers in order to survive the blockade and extend the war effort.

The early emphasis on the male experience in the collecting activities of the United Daughters of the Confederacy continued even as the museum moved away from its initial focus on the Civil War. The Cape Fear Museum identified, in a recent document created as part of its efforts at creating a collecting plan, a list of collections it deemed as “excellent” or its strongest collections. Every collection on this list relates to war and the military including the original UDC collection and the Blockade Runner Museum collection, both documenting the Civil War. Other “excellent” collections include the Isaac Tillery collection and the Robert C. Cantwell collection, both documenting World War I. Several World War II collections round out the

150 Cox, 24.
These collections demonstrate that the museum’s early emphasis on military activity and war led to the creation of strong, male-centric collections, which remain some of the museum’s strongest, most complete areas of collecting today.

Some of these materials also remain most important or most valuable to the museum. As part of the museum’s Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Plan, revised in 2013, the collections staff compiled a list of twenty-eight priority artifacts that should be recovered first in the event of an emergency or natural disaster. According to Terri Hudgins, the museum registrar, these artifacts are “objects with the highest appraisal values as well as other items that we deem rare and irreplaceable (even though we may not have a monetary value assigned to them).” This list includes eight items relating to men’s military involvement, four of which are from the Civil War era. Only three items belonged to or directly related to women, two of which are both bills of sale for enslaved women. The third is a watercolor set owned by Jane Sprunt. Three more items relate directly to the 1898 race riots in Wilmington and at least four more relate to African American history, including slavery. Four artifacts relate to firefighting in Wilmington and the remaining items include furniture, home furnishings, men’s personal belongings, a North Carolina state flag, and a United States flag from 1861. This priority list suggests that together with the assessment of the museum’s strong collections, men’s military artifacts are well-represented in the collection, valued, and more well-known and accessible than objects relating to women. This list, however, also suggests that the museum simply does not have objects of monetary value relating to women.

151 “Collecting Plan: Notes,” undated, Collections Planning files, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum.
152 Terri Hudgins, museum registrar, personal communication, email, May 6, 2015.
153 The list of priority artifacts was also provided through personal communication with Terri Hudgins, email, May 6, 2015. For security purposes, Hudgins could not share which of the artifacts are considered priorities because of their monetary value and which for their historical significance.
While the Cape Fear Museum’s collecting history has affected what the collection contains, the history of cataloging procedures has affected the ability to effectively search, sort, and retrieve items based on their relationship to larger themes. Items that were part of the original UDC collection have faced a long and unstandardized cataloging history, as have many objects acquired after the management of the museum changed hands. Standardized museum cataloging practices did not begin to develop until 1906 with the establishment of the American Association of Museums and collection systems continued to vary throughout the twentieth century. The early imperfect systems, which were derived from libraries, were not updated until the use of computer-based databases in the 1990s. Furthermore, many museums operated by volunteers or non-professional staff suffered from lack of standardization.

In the case of the Cape Fear Museum, the history of standard cataloging and collecting practices may be a contributing factor to incomplete, unhelpful provenance descriptions. However, there have been opportunities to review and edit descriptions to meet modern standards when the museum converted from the card catalog used in the 1980s to Past Perfect, the first database program at the museum, in the early 1990s. The records were converted again in the late 1990s when the museum switched from Past Perfect to its current system, Re:discovery. These shifts, especially the initial transfer from the card catalog to Past Perfect, involved a great deal of effort already, but would have been a prime time to update the catalog records.

As Rebecca Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore pointed out in their 2007 guide to solving collections issues, “human nature mixes with chronic lack of space, too few collections staff, and

---

informal collecting histories” to produce problems. Buck and Gilmore focus on how these issues create collections with “objects that are not useful to the museum, partially accessioned objects, [and] found-in-collection objects,” among other complications; however, their larger point is that these conditions create collections without the best documentation. These issues are contributing factors to the lack of research and thorough cataloging that affects the Cape Fear Museum’s collection, limiting access to artifacts, including those relating to women’s lives.

The provenance and object descriptions of many of the items that belonged to women illuminate issues in the research and cataloging of artifacts in the collection. For example, the provenance description for Eliza Hall Nutt Parsley’s knitting needles dedicates more space to her husband’s experience of the war instead of to how she might have used the knitting needles to contribute to the war effort. The same is true for the provenance of a tatting shuttle that once belonged to Parsley. The description notes the object as “part of original United Daughters of the Confederacy collection, early relic #64” and describes Eliza Hall Nutt Parsley as the founder of the Cape Fear chapter of the UDC. However, it largely defines her as the “widow of Lt. Col. William Murdock Parsley.” It also fills most of the space with a description of her husband’s Civil War record: “The donor’s husband was captured at Spotsylvania Court House, VA on May 12, 1864. Lt Col. Parsley was imprisoned at Ft. Delaware. Later exchanged at Charleston, SC on August 2, 1864, Lt. Col. Parsley was killed at Farmville, VA on April 6, 1865.” Thus the focus of the provenance of a tatting shuttle donated by a woman is her Civil War soldier-husband’s service and death.

155 Buck and Gilmore, 3.
157 Tatting shuttle, Permanent Collection, Cape Fear Museum of History and Science.
While the tatting shuttle was donated by Eliza it is not evident that it was hers or that she used it. However, this provenance may have described the uses of a tatting shuttle, the role of such an object in cloth production, and the role it would have played in the owner’s life, duties, and experience of the war. Instead, the provenance description offers no context for Eliza Parsley’s experience with war, which is presented in the catalog as secondary to her husband’s. Eliza Parsley was one of the founders of the UDC’s museum and she provided artifacts in order to demonstrate women’s domestic supporting roles; however, the cataloging process placed more effort into detailing her husband’s military experience. Artifacts relating to women’s duties and experiences have been included in the collection, but the emphasis in collecting, research, and cataloging has been on men’s experiences.

A lack of research and related incomplete cataloging has made it difficult to find objects relating to women’s lives. When searching for the keyword ‘woman’ only 3,792 results come up while searching for ‘man’ returns 4,158 results. However, with ‘women’ 3,698 results return but only 2,485 for ‘men.’ There are more returns for the word male than for the word female, more for boy than girl. Searches for ‘black women’ yielded 51 returns and combinations of ‘women’ and ‘work’ returned 113 results as compared to 463 for ‘men’ and ‘work.’\textsuperscript{158} However, these numerical results of keyword searches offer little indications of the contents of the collection.

Not every item associated with women will include the word women in its description. In fact, most will not. Descriptions of items in the catalog are only physical descriptions rather than descriptions of use and the provenance recorded in the catalog usually describes the life of the donor at length, even if the donor was not the original owner or user of the object. These

\textsuperscript{158}Permanent Collection, accessed via Re:discovery, Cape Fear Museum.
cataloging practices obscure interesting items and return irrelevant search results. For example, when searching the catalog for the phrase ‘women’s rights’ 253 items display; however, every one of these results is in the YWCA collection. All of the items display because every object shares the same copied and pasted provenance description, which vaguely mentions the YWCA’s role in women’s rights. This information is thorough and helpful if one is interested primarily in the history of the YWCA; however, other materials related to women’s rights do not appear, such as materials related to the effort to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. Items relating to the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment are not retrieved by searching for women’s rights. This is because the description in the catalog of these items does not explain the amendment or its political context. These items were accidentally found in the assessment by searching for political buttons. Provenances and descriptions should more specifically address the origin, ownership, use, personal association, and other connections of specific objects rather than focusing primarily on donors lives more generally.

In addition to the difficulties in locating items relating to women there are specific groups of women who are not represented well in the collections. Objects pertaining to Native American women, African American women, as well as lesbians and transgender women are not present in large numbers or in varied ways. Most results when searching for black women are photographs or documents such as slave deeds. The inability to find more three-dimensional objects relating to black women likely has to do with cataloging, since a household item or personal item is more likely to be cataloged by function than by a description of its owner’s racial, class, or gender status. It is standard cataloging practice to classify objects by their function; however, the issue of locating objects by their personal association raises questions of how to catalog better so that it is easier to find objects that can be used to explore race, gender, or class.
Laura Brandon argued that cataloging methods have obscured women’s items which are available, causing searches of the catalogue to not readily reveal the objects related to women. Brandon gave the example of a photograph of a young male pilot. The photograph had been accompanied by a letter when donated, explaining that the photo was of the donor’s mother’s first love. The photograph was passed from the young man’s mother to the donor’s mother and then to the donor herself. Brandon pointed out that “significantly, the subject in the display is a male, but the story is entirely from a woman’s perspective. Yet if you search for this story in the museum’s database, you will not find it. Cataloguing has not captured this tale.” Brandon further demonstrated this issue in cataloging by searching the collection of war art for words such as woman, women, or female, finding that many items she was already aware of as having women as subjects were not returned in the search results. To correct cataloging issues such as these, Brandon called upon making use of archival records and using a more “careful and less traditional” system of cataloging to help find objects based on their context and significance rather than simply their function. This method of cataloging would allow staff to pull up objects that relate to women’s experiences because of the personal story attached rather than its formal use. These methods would be most helpful in finding objects not usually associated with women’s experiences.

The practical application of Brandon’s suggestion should not necessarily take the radical form of changing nomenclature and basic object categorization. Instead Brandon’s work can be applied in the form of researching the context of an artifact and including that information, alongside the physical description, in the catalog record so that a search in the entire catalog

---

159 Brandon, 110.
160 Brandon, 111.
would pull out those records that have associations with women. Her suggestions are less radical when viewed as more thorough descriptions in the catalog record rather than as completely changing the taxonomy and categories for artifacts. Her cataloging proposition is a plea for research that keeps in mind the possible gendered connections objects seemingly unrelated to women can have and making note of those connections in descriptions and provenance notes in the catalog.

Another example of the lack of research and thorough cataloging at the Cape Fear Museum can be found in the provenance description of a teaspoon, circa 1900. The provenance for the teaspoon states that it was “Found by Barbara Marcroft on Market Street between Front and Water Streets.” The provenance description then goes into very rich detail about the life of Barbara Marcroft. Her experiences living in Wilmington since the 1940s certainly make her life story interesting for the museum; however, this particular item does not benefit from a description of her life. Because the object was found and no original owner is known, a more helpful provenance description would have been one based on research into teaspoons of the early 1900s, their uses, and speculation as to the class and status of its owner. However, Barbara Marcroft’s information has been copied to every item she donated to the museum, regardless of actual origin.

The problem of redundant provenances used across all items donated by a single person is that it obscures the differences between objects and the specific, sometimes personal uses of individual items. This is an issue that is not specific to items relating to women; however, it especially obscures items that are traditionally associated with men but may, because of the personal context, be representative of a woman’s life. The lack of useful information in the provenance about potential uses and owners of relatively unknown objects underscores the
importance of research when accepting new acquisitions. Potential connections between unknown objects and lesser known histories are missed when objects are not fully researched. When accepting new artifacts, the museum should obtain as much information as possible from the donor and then carefully research the items. As Daniel Reibel states in his work on registration methods, “Research is never completed…You also must conduct research on the objects in the museum. Who made or used them, when they made them, and how they were used will be constant objects of research.”\textsuperscript{161} Research should continue on artifacts long after they are accessioned in order to uncover as much about them as possible. Better understanding of the artifacts in the collection can help staff to make connections between objects and larger themes.

There were occasionally notes in the database record that more information was available in the accession file. If this research was added to the database, or at least more of it, it would increase chances of finding material based on its relationship to larger themes. However, there are also some disadvantages as longer descriptions can make searches unwieldy as more and more words will pull up more and more records. Creative catalog searching will likely always be needed.

Cataloging is limited not only by research within an individual institution but also by accepted practices in the wider field. Cataloging focuses heavily on formal use of items and technical description, with accepted museum nomenclature based on objects ideally having one formal function. While a standardized nomenclature based on function is necessary to ensure consistency across professionals and institutions, electronic catalogs today offer opportunities to include additional information in the catalog record that can assist in searching for objects based

on informal use, personal anecdotes, or social and cultural history connections. Perhaps it is time for the museum field to look to digital technology, social media, and other new technology for models in categorizing, labeling, and searching.

Research of the collection involves many practical considerations in a collection of over 50,000 artifacts collected over more than 100 years. Early collecting, identification, and research was limited by the level of professionalization while the today’s staff faces limited time to conduct research on the existing collection.\footnote{Buck and Gilmore, 4.} However, more research of items in the collection and more-thorough cataloging is a worthy task to take on as it can improve knowledge of the collection across the board, increasing institutional knowledge of holdings and offering new ideas for exhibitions. The staff has already demonstrated efforts to improve the collection’s accessibility and use through efforts to deaccession unnecessary artifacts that are either too deteriorated, not relevant to the history of the Cape Fear Region, or if there are better examples in the collection. Other techniques have included social media efforts aimed at exposing followers to more items in the collection and placement of some collections items on the museum’s website. The staff has also begun a collections plan, a document aimed at explicitly assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the collection and future collecting activities. These steps, combined with a concerted effort to research and catalog objects more fully and creatively can lead to better visibility of objects’ connections not only to women’s history, but also issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other marginalized, controversial, or sensitive interpretive topics.
Other museums have realized that their collections lack artifacts relating to women and that gender needs to be used as a category of analysis for acquisitions as well as research of the collection. Museums Australia created a number of overarching policies demonstrating commitment to inclusion of members of diverse cultures, women, and gay and lesbian individuals.\textsuperscript{163} The women’s policy admits that “traditionally museums have represented the interests of the dominant groups in our society, and have tended to privilege the lives and experiences of men over those of women.”\textsuperscript{164} The policy states two general principles acknowledging both the equal right of women to representation in collections and museum programs and the diversity of experiences among women. The report addresses all aspects of museums, including collections, noting the need for gender to be considered as an analytical category when assessing the significance of artifacts and the importance of collecting to represent the “lives of women in all their diversity.”\textsuperscript{165}

In the United States, the National Museum of American History updated its collections plan to reflect an effort to “capture the breadth, depth, and complexity of experiences of people in America” by looking for “items to illuminate stories and groups under-represented in the collections” because of categories such as class, community, education, ethnicity, gender, race, region, religion, sexual orientation, and work.\textsuperscript{166} The collections plan for NMAH also underscores the importance of assessing collections and collecting goals periodically as well as the need for research to provide context for new acquisitions. These museums have institutionalized their commitment to including women by being specific and explicit in their

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} "Collections Plan: Phase 1, National Museum of American History, 2005, in Cape Fear Museum files.
\end{flushleft}
goals for equal representation and by outlining policies and practices for collections to meet those goals.

As the above examples demonstrate, in order to determine gaps in the collection relating to women’s history and to alter collecting practices as to include more objects relating to women, the Cape Fear Museum should become explicit in its development of a collecting plan in order to make a clear institutional commitment to the collecting, researching, and interpreting of women’s history. The current draft plan makes explicit mention of the need to be inclusive of ethnic and religious cultural diversity. It also mentions the importance of the story of family and home life; however, it does not explicitly acknowledge the importance of gender as an analytic category to interpret the experiences and stories of the residents of the Cape Fear region.¹⁶⁷

The museum’s current collections policy outlines the scope of the collection with the following statement of purpose: “Cape Fear Museum collects, preserves, and interprets objects relating to the history, science, and cultures of the Lower Cape Fear region, and makes those objects and their interpretation available to the public through educational exhibitions and programs.”¹⁶⁸ This broad statement is then clarified by defining the Lower Cape Fear region, and specifying that natural history items must be indigenous to the region while material culture items should have been made or used in the region. “Thus, the collection is intended to represent all aspects of the region, from natural history to history, from preliterate times to the 21st century.”¹⁶⁹ While the collections policy does not specifically state women’s history, its broad parameters for what it collects definitely includes items relating to women’s experiences.

¹⁶⁷ CFM Collecting Plan Draft.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
A collections policy differs from a collecting plan, which more specifically outlines what the collection already has, what it needs, and its intellectual goals. A collecting plan is a more focused planning document. The Cape Fear Museum has begun the process of creating a collecting plan, but like many other museums it faces obstacles in lack of staff time and resources for developing a detailed plan. The completion of the collecting plan, which should include a gap analysis of the existing collection and acknowledge needs and steps it can take to fill those gaps, would greatly aid the museum in living up to its goals to interpret the diversity of the past in the Cape Fear Region, including the diversity of lived experiences of men and women. These planning documents acknowledge the need to collect additional clothing, furniture, decorative arts, and household items, especially from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; however, this needs assessment does not acknowledge the gendered dimensions of these items. Such an acknowledgement in the collections plans and policies of the museum would strengthen women’s history as a priority in collections, ensuring that when such connections exist, museum staff research and acknowledge them in cataloging.

The Cape Fear Museum’s collecting history, lack of research into the gendered dimensions of artifacts, and a need for more thorough cataloging and explicit acknowledgement of gender in collecting policies and planning have limited access and understanding of artifacts relating to women’s experiences. The museum’s interpretation of women’s history suffers in part from the difficulty of finding women in the collections catalog. Overall, the Cape Fear Museum’s collection holds great potential for telling the diverse stories of women in the Cape Fear region. These stories and the objects that represent them need to be better understood and

more thoroughly cataloged. The assessment of the Cape Fear Museum’s collection offers a plan of action for other museums seeking to improve and broaden their interpretation of women’s history. The first step is to assess the collection, not only for available artifacts relating to women’s lives, but also for their accessibility. The museum should consider its policies, priorities, and plans to determine how it might work to better understand and interpret its collection through research, thorough cataloging and explicit planning for collecting artifacts based on their potential to offer insight women’s lives.
While there are opportunities in the Cape Fear Museum’s permanent exhibition to expand the interpretation of women’s history, another option exists in curating a temporary exhibit on women’s lives. The museum staff recently began exploring a possible exhibit focused on women-owned businesses and women’s work in Wilmington, tentatively entitled “Working Women.” This concept began with interest in interpreting women’s history in general and an observation that the collection held several groups of objects related to individual women-owned businesses, largely from the twentieth-century. As a cheaper and less time-consuming option, this practical alternative to redesigning the permanent exhibition could provide an in-depth exploration of women’s work and experiences in the Cape Fear region. However, as a separate, temporary exhibit focused on one aspect of women’s lives, this approach could also limit the interpretation of women’s history.

This proposed exhibit offers the opportunity to explore the benefits and drawbacks of separate versus integrated exhibits about women’s history. I argue that integrating women’s history into the permanent exhibition is the best way to ensure a long-term, balanced interpretation of women’s experiences. However, as the proposed exhibit is the more expedient option, this resource evaluation also explores the rich resources and materials available both in the museum’s collection and in terms of primary and secondary sources for creating an exhibit on women’s work and businesses in the twentieth century.

---

171 Barbara Rowe, “Working Women,” internal planning document, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Wilmington, North Carolina.
Curator Barbara Rowe informally drafted the initial project goals and ideas in a planning document as such:

The major goal would be to showcase the kinds of businesses women were involved in here in the LCF [Lower Cape Fear]. While working women are common—even expected—today in the 21st century, I suspect that the general public typically thinks, historically-speaking, women remained in the home taking care of family. While this may be true for a large part of society, there were plenty of women who had to support themselves and their families and so started a business venture.\textsuperscript{172}

The planned focus of the exhibit is on the early to mid-twentieth century, the time period best documented for women’s businesses in the collection; however, the specific focus of the exhibit was still unclear and open to many different directions. Another planning document describes the exhibit as one “about how Wilmington women started businesses and/or supported themselves and their families during the 20\textsuperscript{th} C.”\textsuperscript{173} This resource evaluation will explore sources for interpreting both women’s work and occupations in general as well as women-owned businesses. The main topic of women’s work offers great potential for interpreting a rich history of women’s lives and work in the context of gender, race, and class. However, interpreting women’s history in this segregated and temporary manner does not address the interpretation of women’s history in the long term, especially if the museum does not make plans for continued interpretation of women’s history beyond the temporary exhibition.

\textsuperscript{172} Rowe, “Working Women.”
\textsuperscript{173} “Working Women of Wilmington,” planning document, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum.
In light of visitor interest and the benefits of connecting to diverse audiences discussed in previous chapters, I argue that it is best to integrate women’s history into the larger narrative. However, staging a separate exhibit focused on women’s history can also have some advantages by offering opportunities to delve deeply into the topic and open the door to further visitor interest in the topic. In the specific case of the Cape Fear Museum, a separate exhibit on women’s work can place women’s businesses and work in context, explaining that women entrepreneurs only represented a fraction of the women living in the Cape Fear Region, while also pointing out the gender conventions and expectations that influenced women’s occupational choices. After outlining the benefits and drawbacks to separate versus integrated exhibits, this chapter will explore the available resources and possible interpretive approaches for the “Working Women” exhibit at the Cape Fear Museum. This resource evaluation offers a model for other museums considering their interpretation of women, outlining the necessary considerations including assessing available sources and objects, making connections to bigger themes, and exploring the benefits and disadvantages to staging separate versus integrated exhibits. Suggested avenues of available research are offered below as a broad outline of the many potential, fruitful directions this exhibit could take.

Women did not make up a large section of the workforce in the eighteenth, nineteenth or even early twentieth centuries. However, as might be expected, women consistently made up half of the population.174 Exploring the census data for Brunswick and New Hanover Counties can help trace women’s employment outside of the home in the Cape Fear region in the twentieth century.

---

174 Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, Retrieved May 23, 2014, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/. By using the University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, I was able to look at large amounts of data at a time and sort census records by sex, occupation, age, and race. This provided numeric results rather than information on specific people.
century. For example, in 1900, there were no female manufacturing wage workers in Brunswick County while there were 239 such male workers. In New Hanover County the number of women in manufacturing in 1900 was 263, which was still markedly less than the 1,509 men who were employed in the same. In the state of North Carolina there were 15,644 female wage earners employed in manufacturing and 44,549 males. These statistics reflect national trends in women’s work. Late nineteenth century society saw “women’s expanding labor force participation [as] an unfortunate necessity that threatened to interfere with their more desirable work at home.”175 While the number of women working in wage labor was growing, still relatively few women engaged in work outside of the home at the turn of the twentieth century. Those who did often held unskilled positions, limited to very few occupational options, and “subject to some of the worst conditions of any wage workers.”176 In North Carolina, women worked largely in the textile industry, an example of light industry, as opposed to the heavy industry men typically engaged in.177

Many changes in women’s work took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One such change was in the demographic makeup of women entering the workforce. In 1890 more than 90 percent of women over the age of 35 were married. Before 1890, the “vast majority” of married women did not engage in paid labor, instead “contributing to the family economy in other ways.”178 After 1890 married women began to more frequently take jobs outside of the home. Women were having fewer children, resulting in fewer years spent in

176 Ibid.
178 Kessler-Harris, 109.
raising children. Technological advancements reduced and eased housework and made many goods previously produced in the home readily available for purchase. The reduction in family size and the new technology freed up time for many married women. Alice Kessler-Harris argued that these women, no longer spending much of their lifetimes birthing and raising children, “would need to find meaningful survival activity” and some, especially those who outlived their partners, “would need to support themselves by finding paid work outside the household.”  

Kessler-Harris’s arguments points to two main reasons for women engaging in work outside of the home, for economic survival and for mental or emotional fulfillment. Since colonial times, single women, widows, and poor women were more likely to work for wages, needing to support themselves in absence of a husband or father or contribute to the earnings of a husband. However, with the changes in the home pointed out by Kessler-Harris, as well as changes in the 1920s resulting from women’s wartime work, the flapper movement of the 1920s, and women’s newly earned suffrage, the early twentieth century saw more women, married or otherwise, pursuing work for other reasons, including boredom, ambition, rebellion, and independence, as well as need. These motives, of course, differed by race and class.

By the mid-twentieth century, women held a larger variety of jobs, but still remained less represented in the workforce than men. These changes over the first decades of the twentieth century are also reflected in the census records. In 1940 there were still six times as many employed males as females in Brunswick County, but only about two times as many in New Hanover County. This is likely due to the city of Wilmington’s increased population and urban

---

179 Ibid, 110.
181 Kessler-Harris, 224-229.
employment opportunities. In terms of women as business owners and employers, in 1940 there were nearly ten times as many male as female employers and own-account workers in Brunswick County and 11.5 times as many male employers as female in the state of North Carolina. However, there were only 2.7 times as many in New Hanover County, making New Hanover County unique in the state for its higher proportion of women employers at that time. In New Hanover County, female employers and own-account workers made up 2.9 percent of the female population while male counterparts made up 8.5 percent of the male population.

Women’s employment generally increased over the course of the twentieth century; however, their occupations were concentrated in certain fields. In 1940 total employed females made up 23.37 percent of all females and female wage and salary workers were the largest category of employment, accounting for 23.37 percent of employed women. Men outnumbered women as operatives, craftsmen, foremen, clerical and sales, and as owners, managers, and officials, as well as farmers and farm managers. However, in 1940 women outnumbered men in domestic service and professional occupations. Domestic service workers made up 8.5% of women in New Hanover County.183

Women’s dominance in domestic service and professional occupations in the Cape Fear Region mirrors larger trends in women’s work in the twentieth century. Domestic service was an especially predominant occupation for African American women. Tera Hunter found in her study of black women’s work from the Civil War through the early twentieth century that “more than 90 percent of black female wage-earners were still confined to domestic work at the turn of the

---

In the Cape Fear region, domestic workers were also majority African American, with domestic work being one of the few options for black women in the early twentieth century. As late as 1995 African American women still made up 63% of housekeepers, child care workers, and cleaners. In terms of professional occupations, Kessler-Harris found that “by 1920 a cadre of trained and eager women had carved out a series of professional areas, many of which were loosely construed as nurturing,” such as nursing and teaching. Cape Fear women’s large numbers in professional fields and domestic service fields represent larger trends in women’s growing presence in the paid labor force.

This census data offers some insight into women’s presence in the workforce over time. More detailed statistical analysis could be done as well as more census research in general, especially in regards to race. The census statistics could be a helpful way to contextualize women’s work in the larger region, compare the Cape Fear Region’s workforce to that of the state, and demonstrate that the majority of women did not work in census-recorded professions outside of the home. The statistics also indicate that women’s increasing presence and diversity in the Cape Fear workforce was largely similar to national trends described by historians. Of course, many occupations women engaged in, especially those operated out of the home, may not be reported on the census. However, the available statistics could be used to help visitors see that while women did work outside of the home, their numbers in the workforce were still not equal with men’s due to limitations on acceptable professions for women. Furthermore, the

---

186 Kessler-Harris, 116-117.
187 Ibid, 128.
statistics show the gendered dimensions of work with the professions women predominantly engaged in differing from those of men.

Another rich resource for contextualizing women’s work and roles in business is the city directories for Wilmington. These sources list local businesses as well as individuals and organizations. The city directories for the years 1900, 1905, 1909-10, 1915-16, 1919-20, 1930, 1934, 1940, 1944-45, and 1950, published by Hill Directory Company, revealed several trends in women’s work and were exceptionally helpful in gathering information about women-owned businesses. By focusing on the business listings rather than the personal listings, some trends in women’s businesses can be determined.

The most numerous occupations or businesses held by women from 1900 to 1950 were boarding houses, clothing retailers, bakers and confectioners, dressmakers, florists, grocers, music teachers, and nurses. Not only did these professions include large numbers of women, but they also largely excluded men, demonstrating the gender segregation of the workforce. Boarding houses were overwhelmingly one of the biggest businesses operated by women in Wilmington. The city directories revealed that in 1900 at least 21 women were listed as the proprietors of boarding houses. Of those 21, 19 were listed as “Mrs.” and only two were listed as “Miss,” indicating that boarding houses were predominantly operated by married or widowed women. In 1905 even more women were listed as boarding house owners with the number reaching 45. More than 40 women operated boarding houses in 1910. The number

---

189 City of Wilmington Directory, Hill Directory Company, 1900, New Hanover County Public Library North Carolina Room, Wilmington, NC.
190 City of Wilmington Directory, 1905.
continued to remain relatively high at 11 in 1930 and 19 in 1940. However, in 1950 there were only two women listed as boarding house proprietors. This shift did not indicate an exodus from the profession though. Instead, 32 women were listed as the proprietors of “furnished rooms,” many of them the same women once listed as boarding house owners. Furnished rooms provided less amenities to lodgers, offering a room with either a hot plate or access to a shared kitchen where boarding houses had provided communal meals to their guests. Furnished rooms were thus less labor-intensive for landladies. The shift may have been caused by changes in women’s access to other occupations as well as changes in ideas of family privacy.

Other notable professions included dressmaking and millinery shops. For example, in 1950 there were twenty-eight dressmakers in Wilmington. Women also appeared increasingly in later years as stenographers, notaries, real estate and insurance agents, and other office-type jobs. There were a few notable instances of women working outside of “feminine” occupations, but alongside husbands. There was one lawyer, one physician (osteopath), and one chiropractor who fell into this category. Other trends in women’s work in the Cape Fear Region included teaching, nursing, and clerical work. By 1920, 80 percent of North Carolina’s teachers were women, the James Walker School of Nursing graduated more than 1,000 nurses between 1902 and 1970, and by 1940 15 percent of employed women worked in retail, clerical work, or service professional jobs.

---

192 *City of Wilmington Directory*, 1930, 1940.
193 *City of Wilmington Directory*, 1950.
195 *Women’s Work A Century’s Worth: A Cape Fear Scrapbook*.
jobs. Textile mills were also leading employers of women in the region, including Delgado Cotton Mill.\textsuperscript{196}

As can be seen, many of the occupations or businesses that women engaged in used “traditional” domestic skills or catered to women clientele. Boarding house proprietors served as hostesses, managing a home and providing meals. Dressmakers made women’s clothing, reproducing the traditional women’s task of cloth production in the home, and producing goods for female consumers. These were considered acceptable, feminine professions and they attracted a largely female workforce. As Kessler-Harris found, “most women, even professionals, still found themselves in job categories that were heavily female.”\textsuperscript{197}

The ways in which businesses and individuals were denoted in the city directories also points connections between race and gender when examining women’s work and businesses in the twentieth century. The city directories differentiated individuals and proprietors of businesses by race and further differentiated women by marital status. African-American individuals or businesses are denoted with an asterisk or the letter ‘c’ in parenthesis alongside their names. This action denotes the racial segregation at the time, and helps to provide some information about the differences in African-American and white women’s work.

African American women can predominantly be seen as the proprietors of eating houses and lunch rooms, as opposed to the separately named category of restaurants, a symptom of segregated establishments. African American women appeared much less often in other businesses such as boarding houses and as music teachers or nurses. African American women appeared as midwives where white women did not and are also among dressmakers and

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{197} Kessler-Harris, 116.
hairdressers. Personal listings in the city directories also revealed African American women to work often as washerwomen and seamstresses. African American women appeared frequently in separate businesses from white women. Black women were more likely to be listed as hairdressers, eating house proprietors, and midwives. The businesses that African American women engaged in in Wilmington were also popular in other cities across the South. Hunter found that women in Atlanta also operated restaurants, clothing stores, hairdressing shops, and worked as midwives. Midwifery was also one of the few professional occupations African American women were able to break into, following teaching and nursing. The differences in work of black and white women points to different gender expectations across race as well as different limitations in work opportunities.

Tera W. Hunter’s *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* traced black women’s experiences, focusing largely on their work, from the end of slavery through roughly the 1920s. She focused mostly on the New South city of Atlanta; however, her findings can inform understandings of Wilmington. Hunter found that “the intense struggles between workers and employers over the character of wage work following emancipation influenced black women’s decisions to establish themselves in jobs that permitted some of the advantages of a home business.” This led many black women to work as laundresses and seamstresses. The largest occupational option for black women though was as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy whites. Hunter argued that black women “had so few other options for wage work.” Furthermore, black women’s domestic labor was at “the

---

198 City directories, 1900-1950.
199 Hunter, 112.
200 Hunter, 58.
201 Hunter, 111 and Jacqueline Jones, 113.
202 Ibid, 111.
bottom of the wage scale” and “low wages continued to plague black women engaged in
domestic work.” These conditions, in addition to long hours and strained relationships with
white employers, made African American women eager to find other ways in which to support
their families.

Some black women were able to break out of domestic work in private households by
taking the same skills to places such as hotels and boardinghouses. Occupational choices began
to diversify between 1900 and 1910. More African American women began working as
seamstresses, dressmakers, and milliners as the clothing industry grew. African American
women worked less often in other occupations, especially those considered “professional.”
Teaching was the largest professional occupation for black women at the turn of the century,
followed by nursing. Overall though, African American women in the urban south of the early
twentieth century “had little choice but to engage in wage-earning activities” and women often
had to serve as breadwinners for their families. In terms of entrepreneurship Hunter found that
“several black women ran businesses of their own, or with other women or spouses, including
boardinghouses, lunch rooms, restaurants, groceries, and ice cream and cold drink parlors.”
The city directories attest to African American women operating these kinds of businesses in
Wilmington as well.

203 Ibid, 111.
204 Ibid, 131.
205 Ibid and Jacqueline Jones, 127-128.
206 Ibid, 111.
207 For more on African American women in professional occupations, see Stephanie J. Shaw, What a Woman
Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era, (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press), 1996. For more on black women in the nursing profession specifically see Darlene Clark Hine, Black
Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950, (Bloomington: Indiana
208 Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the
209 Hunter, 112.
The comparison of work by race presents an opportunity to address how race affected gender expectations; black women were not held to the standards of white femininity. This is a difficult topic to interpret, but by showing how black women did the work that was considered inappropriate for white women this difference could be demonstrated. The difference began in slavery but continued after emancipation. In addition to being found in different occupations, black women are not listed as Miss or Mrs. until 1950 while white women are almost always listed as one or another. This difference suggests that gender expectations were not applied evenly by race and black women’s femininity was not considered the same as white women’s.

In addition to the sources outlined above, other available primary sources include oral histories in UNCW’s Archives and Special Collections and various papers and collections in the New Hanover County Public Library’s North Carolina Room. UNCW has made transcripts of many oral histories available online. A search for those related to women produced several that include information on women and work. Other potential sources include newspapers, and Block Books of commercial street addresses or family names of known businesswomen, all located in the North Carolina Room. The North Carolina Room also has an unprocessed collection of scrapbooks related to a women’s professional business organization. The Business

210 See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1988 for slavery context. Fox-Genovese describes antebellum era southern women’s lives, focusing on how gender, class, and race all affected women’s roles and identities. There is some discussion of the differences in the work done by slave women and white women and in how race affected the application of gender roles.

211 Interview with Mary Dixon Bellamy, May 24, 2005, UNCW Archives and Special Collections Online Database; http://randall3.uncw.edu/ascod/?p= digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=218, Interview by LuAnn Mims and Gerald Parnell. “In this interview with Wilmington Notable Mary Bellamy, she discusses her family history and the city of Wilmington during her childhood and young adulthood. Born in 1925, she recounts Wilmington’s economic situation post-WW1 and during the depression era as well as provides information about her historic home.” Mrs. Bellamy talks about her first job as a postmistress at Maffit Village where her father worked as a plumber during the summer of 1943 right before she went to UNC. She was hired to by a typist by a businesswoman named Mrs. Cole but she typed slower than other typists and was reassigned to the post office.
and Professional Woman’s Club of Wilmington was organized in 1940 or 1941 with 24 members. By 1947 the membership roster included 79 members. The organization held programs, conventions, elected officers, shared its members’ professional accomplishments, and participated in social welfare campaigns. It offered a networking opportunity for local women entrepreneurs and connected them to state and national women’s professional organizations.212

The research and resources exist to present a complicated picture of women’s work and business ownership in the Cape Fear region. This interpretation includes both gender and race as lenses through which to understand women’s work, which differed from men’s in many ways and differed by race. The Cape Fear Museum’s collection supports the myriad of possibilities presented by the resources outlined above. The Working Women exhibit could develop in many different directions, focusing on entrepreneurship or women’s work more broadly, comparing the work of white and black women, or comparing the work of men and women. The museum’s collection contains items that could aid in the interpretation of many of women’s occupations and businesses, as well as aspects of work in the home.

The collection contains many items relating to specific businesses including florists, candy makers, seamstresses, milliners, and other shops. It contains items from specific Wilmington shops as well as some more general pieces. For example there are items from a candy shop on Castle Street in the 1940s, a large collection of objects from a beauty parlor called Brownie’s Beauty Styles. Gladys E. Brown operated Brownie's Beauty Styles out of her house at 809 Chestnut Street for 60 years from the 1930s through the 1990s, and some items relating to

Lucy B. Moore’s flower shop. The objects related to Brown’s work could be helpful in interpreting women’s businesses run out of the home and the connections between paid and unpaid domestic labor. Lucy Moore’s flower shop is well-represented in the collections with photos of advertisements in the Azalea Festival parades and business cards. There are also photos in the New Hanover County Library’s Digital Archives in the Louis T. Moore Collection and in the Port City Architecture collection.

The collection also contains clothing and hats from women-owned clothing and millinery stores as well as display materials, accessories, and tools used in the shops. Some of the well-known shops include the Lelia Corbin Shop and the Julia. The collection contains items related to these shops as well as more obscure shops or individual women. One hat in the collection is noted as having been “bought by donor’s mother at Lila (milliner) on Front St., Wilmington” circa 1945. There were also women who worked as seamstresses, such as Ida Chesnut Moseley, and women who made items for interior decorating, such as the woman who owned Dorothy’s Ruffled Originals. In addition to the hats and clothing themselves, the collections include hat molds, stretchers, boxes, and advertisements. One advertising card from circa 1910 details the Ladies Emporium of Art and Fashion on Market Street, millinery, dress and cloak

213 Permanent Collection, Cape Fear Museum. Brownie’s Beauty Styles collection, 2000.12.1-90. Lucy B. Moore Flower Shop. Items include Booklet, 1993.024.0006, "Living with Flowers," July 1956; Fan, funeral, 2003.007.0002. Card, Trade, 2005.045.0005. The florist shop ran under the name Lucy B Moore from 1900 (probably earlier) through 1950s at least—it seems it was bought out by someone else though or left to someone. Business card lists F.D Edwards and W. Eugene Edwards. Lucy B Moore, florist listed at Dock Street in 1900 City Directory, but in 1905 it is listed at 1506 Market. It is also listed as Miss Lucy B Moore until 1930 when the Miss is dropped. Perhaps this is when it was no longer run by the individual Lucy B Moore.


215 Hat, 1983.005.0005.
making. Mrs. Elizabeth B. Wiggins is advertised as the proprietress. These items offer a window into women’s work in fashion, a dominant entrepreneurial choice in both the North and the South.

There are also artifacts representing dressmakers or seamstresses, either those in official business or those who worked from home. A dressmaker’s pin, a tailor’s ham, and a style booklet about “Home Dressmaking” can all be found in the museum’s holdings. These items offer a chance to explore the nature of women’s work, the process of designing and making dresses, and the skill necessary to do so. While some of the artifacts lack a personal story, others contain specific provenances. A 1951 “Fashion Preview” booklet was owned by Mrs. Jacob Parrott (Mary) Mewborne. She lived in Sunset Park and “was an accomplished seamstress who made many items of clothing ranging from aprons to men’s shirts to wedding gowns for various members of her extended family.”

Some items in the collection offer insight into how women supported their families without husbands. Rosa Stefano operated a candy shop on Castle Street to support her six children. Her taffy machine is a part of the collection and she was listed in the city directories as a grocer and soft drink distributor as well. She was an Italian-American woman and a widow. These aspects of her life should be taken into consideration when trying to understand why she began her own business as well as why she entered into the business of candy-making.

220 Rosa Stefano appears as a grocer in the City Directory of Wilmington, 1934 but under “Confectionery and Ice Cream” in the City Directory of Wilmington, 1940, in which she is also identified as a widow in the personal listings. A “Working Women of Wilmington” planning document, which listed a few collections containing items from women’s businesses, includes information on Rosa Stefano’s candy shop, including her Italian background.
Perhaps having her own business enabled her to economically support her family while also having the flexibility to be physically present when necessary. The business also put to use domestic skills involved in cooking and baking.

Beyond women-owned businesses, the collection also holds potential for discussing women’s involvement in other professions, notable “nurturing” or service positions including teachers and nurses. One photograph shows the students of Miss Mamie Alderman’s school.\textsuperscript{221} There are a lot of artifacts in the collection related to education and teaching, as well as a lot of primary sources and images. Teaching is already shown relatively well in the permanent exhibit, but is not explicitly described as a female-dominated profession. Nursing was a female-dominated profession all throughout the twentieth century. The collection contains a nurse’s cape from 1950 worn by Lois C. Bowman while she was in training at James Walker Memorial Hospital School of Nursing.\textsuperscript{222} A 1953 photograph of the graduating class of Walker School of Nursing also shows the number of women in the field.\textsuperscript{223}

The collection also holds potential for interpreting women’s economic lives more generally. Women were always a part of an informal economy even when they were not directly employed outside the home. Women produced goods for the household and sometimes to trade or sell from the colonial era. Some objects offer insight into these domestic tasks that supplied the household, such as a 1910 butter churn, early twentieth-century sewing needles, a 1900 soap paddle, and various other tools used to knit, sew, and weave.\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{221} Photograph, 1982.046.0031, pupils of Miss Mamie Alderman School.
\textsuperscript{222} Nurse’s Cape, 1987.039.0001.
\textsuperscript{223} Photograph, 1971.007.0046.
In addition to producing goods for the household and beyond women also worked within the home, cleaning and cooking. Over time, technology changed some of the ways in which women cleaned. Melosh discusses an exhibit that successfully traced technology’s effects on women’s domestic lives. The Cape Fear Museum could explore the uses of objects and how they affected women’s daily lives in terms of difficulty of labor. A 1953 floor polisher offers an example of a device that was likely supposed to make women’s work easier.\footnote{Floor Polisher, 1989.002.0002.}

The collection contains numerous items that can be used to interpret a variety of women’s working experiences including owning businesses, in separate commercial locations as well as in their own homes, working in service professions, and working in their own homes without pay. However, the collection lacks enough artifacts about African Americans’ working experiences. The collection does contain some images of black women engaged in domestic work as nannies; however, there are not many other material objects representing black women’s work, especially in other fields.\footnote{Photograph, 1980.045.0047, Black woman with young white child and a teddy bear in a toy baby carriage, 1914; Lithograph, 1914; 1981.001.0168, "Mammy" women seated by fire--1 white woman dressed in ruffled gown, 1 black woman in turban & apron; Photograph, 1981.036.0038, Black woman holding an infant [Mary Margeret, 3 months old] standing next to porch steps, ca. 1920.}

The collection also lacks items relating to women's major role as keepers of boarding houses, largely because this was a business run from women's own homes. Items relating to domestic life could be used; however, it would be better if specific items from boarding houses were acquired. The only items relating to boarding houses currently found in the collections are a photo of a boarding house at Wrightsville Beach and a bar of soap advertising Miss Ethel Hatch Tourist Home in Wilmington.\footnote{Photograph, 2008.002.0054, Boarding house at Wrightsville Beach; Soap, 2004.023.0001 Soap, Hotel size bar of Cashmere Bouquet advertising Miss Ethel Hatch Tourist Home at 115 S. 3rd Street in Wilmington.}
The field of women’s history is putting much emphasis on “four major areas of recent inquiry on gender: the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (and other categories) in shaping individual women's identities and gender regimes; relational differences among women of varied statuses; the mutual construction of sexual and gender norms; and the conceptual destabilizing of gender and sex.” Scholarly debates in public history have also recently been exploring understandings of gender and its effects on women’s lived experiences. This exhibit has the potential to fit into the newest women’s history scholarship by comparing the work of women of various marital statuses, races, and maybe classes. It also has the potential to point out gender constructs that have historically determined what occupations most women held and why.

Overall, the exhibit has a number of interesting possibilities that primary and secondary sources as well as the collection have the ability to support. The primary and secondary source research clearly supports the topic of women’s work and women’s businesses and offers context and specific examples. Research confirms that women in Wilmington participated in the public economic world and that their story is worth telling. Based on the city directory research especially, numerous women participated in businesses and their stories offer a chance to debunk myths about women’s place in past societies. The exhibit could present the variety of occupations women have engaged in and explain the gendered circumstances that affected the kinds of work open to women or considered appropriate for women. The exhibit presents the possibility to compare women’s jobs to men’s and explain why certain professions were

---

considered more appropriate than others. The differences between women’s professions and men’s demonstrate how women’s work and businesses still reflected their “traditional” roles.

While the proposed temporary exhibit has potential for presenting an in-depth, critical interpretation of women’s work, there are some limitations due to the separate, temporary nature of the exhibit. Both women’s historians in the academy and public historians have discussed the relative merits and drawbacks of women’s history as a separate category of study. Kriste Lindenmeyer, in her 2003 article about incorporating women’s history into United States survey courses, quoted pioneering women’s historian Gerda Lerner’s opinion on the subject. When “asked if it was time to eliminate the separate focus on women’s history [Lerner] responded, ‘For over 4,000 years, men have defined culture by looking at the activities of other men…Give us another 4,000 years and we’ll talk about mainstreaming.’”

Lerner’s point holds especially true for academic historians working to “find” women in history and attend to previous neglected avenues of research. However, Lindenmeyer pointed out an issue with Lerner’s approach when she argued that “her point is a good one, yet the majority of undergraduates will never take a women’s history class. It is therefore important to weave women’s history into the standard U.S. history survey.” Lindenmeyer worked to include women’s history in U.S. history survey courses by using online resources to supplement textbooks in order to put “women’s experiences at the core instead of the fringes.” While her work is already over ten years old and focused on classroom education, her argument for integrated women’s history rings true for museums as

231 Lindenmeyer, 1483.
232 Ibid.
well. Rather than place women’s history on the “fringes” museums can integrate women’s history into the main narrative.

In the case of the Cape Fear Museum, its rotating exhibit spaces are physically on the fringes. A separate space for women’s history rather than an integrated interpretation in the main exhibition creates the perspective that women’s history is less important, an extra topic to be considered if you have enough time, rather than an integral part of the region’s past. Beyond physically separating women’s history, a short-term exhibit places temporal limitations on women’s history as well. Once the exhibit’s run is over, future visitors will lack the opportunity to engage with women’s history unless it is added more critically to the permanent exhibition. Furthermore the proposed topic, women’s businesses and work, narrows the focus of the exhibit to women’s economic roles, thus not offering a complete portrait of women’s lives. A separate exhibit does not correct long-term issues of lack of balanced representation.

A study of how slavery is interpreted at plantation houses in the South presents an analogous framework for understanding the differences between integrated and separate exhibitions on women’s history. Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small conducted a study of plantation museums, largely focusing on their guided tours. Their study, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, outlined four categories of representational strategies: symbolic annihilation and erasure of slavery, trivialization and deflection of the experience of enslavement, segregation and marginalization of knowledge, and relative incorporation. These categories ranged from a complete absence of interpretation of
slavery to bare mentions and stereotypical portrayals to separate, alternative, and often unequal tours to actual integrated incorporation of slavery in the main tour. 

While focusing on the interpretation of slavery in historic house museums through guided tours, Eichstedt’s and Small’s work provides a valuable model for women’s history in museums. For example, presenting women’s history only through stereotypical added-in information about domestic life would amount to the classification of trivialization while presenting women’s history through a separate exhibit would amount to segregated knowledge. While women are included in the main exhibition at the Cape Fear Museum, their lives are minimalized, underrepresented, and not fully interpreted. The museum’s plans to curate an exhibit on women’s businesses would amount to segregated knowledge. However, making an effort to include a more complicated presentation of women’s in the permanent exhibit by interpreting the many different aspects of women’s lives would be analogous to relative incorporation.

While not a perfect analogy, some of Eichstedt’s and Small’s conclusions about segregated tours can inform discussion of separate museum exhibits. Eichstedt’s and Small’s description of segregated or marginalized knowledge supports the idea that women’s history should be integrated into the main narrative of the past. They acknowledged that the sites with segregated tours on slavery should be “commended for developing information about the institution of slavery…This is an improvement over sites that minimally and superficially deal with this issue.” However, these sites were still creating “segregated knowledge.” Eichstedt and Small found this an issue because they argued that every visitor should “come away with at least some knowledge of enslavement” and those who attend the “regular tours” that do not

---

234 Eichstedt and Smalls, 199.
integrate slavery were not leaving with a better understanding of slavery.\textsuperscript{235} Visitors to the Cape Fear Museum will have a greater chance of walking away with an understanding of women’s lives if women’s history is integrated more completely into the permanent exhibition.

Beyond academic history and analogies from the public history of slavery, public historians working to incorporate women’s history at their sites have also raised the “question of whether women’s history should be presented as a separate issue or integrated into the general history.”\textsuperscript{236} Like Lindenmeyer, many have argued that it should be integrated. The interpretation at one Aboriginal history site in Canada considered women’s history as a separate topic “artificial” since it “implies that women somehow lived and moved in a sphere separate from the rest of Carrier [local Aboriginal] history.”\textsuperscript{237} This example makes the case for explaining women’s roles in relationship with those of men as well as other women of various races, classes, or other backgrounds by integrating women’s lives into the larger narrative.

Barbara Howe and Helen Bannan also argued for integrating women’s history into museums, noting in their 1995 article on strategies for local history museums that “true gender inclusiveness means doing more than a single exhibit or special issue; to say ‘we did it once’ is good, but it isn’t enough. Transforming our presentation of the past so that it includes women’s history requires reinterpretation of readily available materials so that their gender dimensions are made explicit.”\textsuperscript{238} Howe and Bannan’s article asserts the need to include women in larger narratives.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid, 200.
\textsuperscript{236} Alan B. McCullough, “Parks Canada and Women’s History,” Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2003, 351.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid, 351.
Despite these arguments, Lerner’s earlier assertion about the continued need to think of women’s history as a separate field holds some validity in terms of the depth awarded to the subject of women’s history through the creation of separate exhibits and projects. Elizabeth H. Pleck explained in her 1982 article that “had women been included in a fair and just way in the writing of history, there would have been little need for the creation of a separate field. But the fact that other areas of history developed without recognizing the actual role of women and without understanding the effect of the relationship of the sexes stands as a criticism of the content of most historical study.”

Pleck’s assertion implies that there is still room for women’s history as a separate field, working to correct the imbalance of representation.

Gail Lee Dubrow’s and Jennifer B. Goodman’s 2003 edited volume, *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, argued for the centrality of gender as an “essential analytical category” but acknowledged that it has not always been seen as such. In Heather A. Huyck’s afterword to the book, she argued that “only many additional case studies showing that tangible resources are essential to understanding the past will give the refusal to recognize gender as a basic human marker its deserved burial.” This assertion, much like Pleck’s earlier argument, implies that more work is needed to make the category of gender central to understanding the past overall before separate focuses on women’s history can be removed.

However, Dubrow’s and Goodman’s volume also argued for future work in women’s history to reconcile women’s past with the national past because “without women’s history, national histories are fundamentally flawed…Women’s history—the full inclusion of women’s history—one day.“

---

experiences in the nation’s past—has the potential to completely rewrite that history for all. Until it does, we are ‘shortchanging’ history and segregating ourselves.”241 These statements suggest that an integrated history that is fully inclusive of women is the end goal of women’s history, not a separate history to go alongside the ‘main’ narrative. So, while separate exhibits on women allow depth and can expose visitors to a host of important issues, full integration of exhibits is a more long-term solution.

While many women’s historians and public historians have argued for the full integration of women’s experiences into the larger narratives of the past, the practical advantages of a separate, temporary exhibit must be considered. Redesigning and installing the entirety of the Cape Fear Museum’s permanent exhibition would be costly, requiring more space, materials, staff time, and other resources. Therefore, the proposed “Working Women” exhibition could be a practical step toward a more balanced interpretation, even if it is not permanent. This temporary exhibit could be a jumping off point for more interpretation of women. Focusing on women exclusively in one section of the exhibits has a compensatory quality to it which can bring women’s history and its former exclusion to light, making visitors more aware of the importance of women’s history and offering the opportunity to explore those topics more fully. Past temporary exhibits at the Cape Fear Museum have not always interpreted women’s history as critically or fully as possible.

The Cape Fear Museum has previously presented temporary exhibits on topics relating to women’s history; however, these have usually failed to contextualize women or to provide critical interpretations through the lens of gender. In a list of 145 exhibits at the Cape Fear

Museum ranging from 1977 to 2014, only ten are on topics obviously relating to women and
only one focuses on gender specifically. That one exhibit was a small, temporary exhibit placed
in the lobby of the museum entitled, “Spotlight-On: Girls’ Play,” and was one of three spotlight
exhibits in the year 2000. The exhibit was meant to showcase artifacts “representing the
American society’s genderification of toys.”

Some exhibits included large amounts of material relating to women, but still failed to
interpret women through the lens of gender. For example, one exhibit on volunteerism in the
Cape Fear Region included women’s work in the local chapter of the American Red Cross as
well as other local volunteer organizations. A 2007 draft of the interpretive plan explicitly
indicated that women had an important role in organizing volunteer groups for various causes
and that the exhibit should “explore the role women played in creating these groups.” Later
documents in the planning process were less focused on the role of women though and by May
2008 the draft goals and objectives had dropped the explicit consideration of women’s roles in
these organizations. The exhibit script was less explicit in its connections between women and
volunteerism and includes men’s groups as well, without explaining why women were more
heavily involved. Women’s roles in volunteer organizations originated in their role as nurturers
and caregivers in the home. Beginning in the nineteenth century, participation in volunteer
organizations was one way for middle- and upper- class women to acceptably extend their reach
from the domestic to the public sphere. By neglecting to make the connection between the

---

242 “Cape Fear Museum Exhibits,” Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, NC.
243 “Draft of Planning and Experience Goals and Objectives for Red Cross Exhibit,” May 3, 2007, Cape Fear
Volunteers Exhibit, Past Exhibits, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum.
244 “Cape Fear Volunteer Exhibit: November 2008 – September 2009,” Exhibit files, Collections Department, Cape
Fear Museum, Wilmington, NC.
245 Cynthia Kierner, Beyond the Household: Women’s Place in the Early South, 1700-1835, (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press), 1998, 7-8. See Anne Firor Scott, Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History,
(Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 1993.
prevalence of women in these organizations and gendered expectations of women, the museum, even while producing exhibits that were women-centric, refrained from directly using gender as an interpretive category.

Another exhibit that had great potential for inclusion of women’s history was one on shopping. *Shopping Around Wilmington* was on display in 2012 and 2013. Topics to explore could have included male vs. female consumer base over time, women’s participation in the local economy both as consumers and as store owners and employees, women’s changing roles, and the 1950s vision of housewives that came at the end of World War II along with the suburbanization that is discussed in the exhibit. Maggie Andrews’s and Mary M. Talbot’s 2000 edited collection explores women’s relationship with consumerism, pointing out that after the Industrial Revolution “purchasing was tied up with the emergence of the new domestic ideology of middle-classness, which was pivoted upon a notion of women in the home but, as time progressed, on the necessity for women to go outside the home to purchase for the home.”

Tracing women’s relationship with shopping over time, the volume also summarizes the rise of department stores at the end of the nineteenth century which “provided a space for women to go outside the home, under the auspices of shopping for the home,” complicating the public versus private sphere division.

However, instead of exploring the gendered dimensions of shopping, the exhibit focused on the location of businesses as suburbanization and urban renewal pushed businesses away from downtown. The exhibit also focused quite a bit on consumer goods. The Julia Dress Shop, a woman-owned business, was profiled; however, details were not given to help visitors

---


247 Ibid.
understand how prevalent women-owned businesses were. Also, despite the fact that the clothing stores used as examples in the exhibit were women’s clothing stores and many of the artifacts were women’s clothing, women were not discussed as being primary consumers. Additionally, the labels merely described fabric, cut, and style of the clothing items on display. However, the labels could have discussed styles of the times and used them to discuss changing gender expectations, explaining why certain styles were popular at certain times. The exhibit could have also explored the home dynamic in a suburban culture, comparing the ideal vision of the 1950s housewife enjoying the post-war economic boom and its related consumerism with the reality of the lived experience of women who did not share in that ideal life. While the exhibit could not have covered all of these topics, a nod to the role of women in consumer society in the twentieth century could have been incorporated.

The Cape Fear Museum’s previous temporary exhibits related to women’s history have been limited by their lack of critical engagement with women’s history through the lens of gender. However, past efforts do not determine future attempts. The “Working Women” exhibit holds great potential for introducing an in-depth, analytical interpretation of the variety of women’s experiences. While focusing on women entrepreneurs and women working outside of the home, the exhibit can explain that many other women worked in the home for no pay, others were wage-earning employees, and some ran businesses out of their home. Trends in the kinds of businesses run by women exist in terms of varying social positions, race, and marital status, as well as gendered differences between women’s and men’s work. Gendered expectations can be seen in the businesses that attracted women. In order to craft a critical interpretation of women’s

work and entrepreneurship the Cape Fear Museum can draw on its rich holdings in the permanent collection as well as local primary sources, and use scholarship written about women’s work in the twentieth century to contextualize the women of the Cape Fear Region.

This exhibit as a case study demonstrates the potential for interpreting women’s history in a more critical, meaningful way. This case study lays out some considerations for other museums to take note of including issues of integrated versus separate exhibits, and the need to interpret a variety of women’s experiences. The wealth of resources available in the museum’s collection as well as in other local repositories points to an important story to tell about women’s work in the twentieth century. The Cape Fear Museum’s proposed new exhibit is a step toward increased interpretation of women’s history and offers the opportunity to combine issues of race and gender in the topic of women’s work. This exhibit has the potential to place women’s history into a more complicated context. While an integrated permanent exhibition is the best solution to the lack of interpretation of women’s history, inclusion of a critical, engaging separate exhibit is a step in the right direction. Perhaps this proposed exhibit can mark a shift at the Cape Fear Museum, leading to more critical and integrated interpretation of women and gender in the near future.
CONCLUSION

In a recent post on the National Council on Public History’s History@Work blog, Cathy Stanton raised the following question, “Where is the next generation of gender studies in public history?” Stanton questioned whether or not it was time to move beyond just adding in stories of women, LGBT individuals, and other historically overlooked populations, finding that “there’s definitely a wider range of stories being told at public sites, but not in ways that challenge visitors to think about these identities in new ways. In the interpretation at museums, historic houses, and other sites, we can see women, gays, and lesbians challenging patterns of exclusion and demanding greater access to the power structure.” However, Stanton found that while these “other” stories are being included at some museums and sites, the categories of gender are not being explored in more complicated and critical ways. She cites the example of a panel at the USS Constitution Museum which “compar[es] visitors with the average sailor of 1812 [by asking] about race, hair color, and distinguishing marks, but never mention[es] the single most salient point: the fact that the sailors were male.” Masculinity is then reinforced as the dominant perspective or narrative because of the lack of discussion about it. As Stanton puts it, “gender categories are reinforced rather than expanded by the kind of “just add minorities and stir” approach that leaves the dominant categories unmarked.”

Despite this need for more critical engagement with categories of gender identity, Stanton continues to question “whether we’ve reached a point where just adding in the ‘subalterns’ is no longer enough. Perhaps we haven’t—perhaps there’s still too much work to be done in chopping

---

250 Ibid.
away at the older exclusionary narratives.” Stanton’s questions imply a need for both—adding neglected history and contextualizing those histories alongside and within what has long been considered the dominant narrative. Inclusion and visibility are still important and necessary for telling neglected stories; however, why can’t public historians both include and push beyond? In the case of women’s history, the need for both inclusion and more critical interpretation is clear.

The example of the Cape Fear Museum has shown that there is a wealth of resources available regarding women's history, including local primary sources, artifacts already in the collection, and women’s history scholarship to frame and contextualize the local narrative of women's history. However, despite the potential of these available resources, there is a need for improved interpretation of women's history that takes a more critical, balanced approach and many challenges to doing so. However, there are also interesting strategies, methods, and sources out there for institutions that want to take steps toward increasing and complicating their interpretation of women’s history.

The steps outlined in the preceding chapters can be applied at many other institutions working to improve their interpretation of women’s and gender history. Steps toward interpreting women’s history must be made in all areas of the museum including collections, education and interpretation, and exhibition. In terms of collections, museums can work to improve research and cataloging by keeping women’s history in mind when accepting and exploring artifacts. One way to help ensure connections are made between artifacts and women’s experiences is to explicitly include gender as a category of analysis in collections policies, planning, and research so that objects relating to women’s lives or issues of gender (both masculine and feminine) are seen as such. Incoming artifacts should be viewed through the lens of gender in order to find the gendered connections that are not always obvious. For example, the Cape Fear Museum has
acknowledged a need to include more household items but has not explicitly connected this need to its potential gendered contexts.\textsuperscript{251} If the museum makes those connections clear it can interpret a more complete picture of women’s lives, not only public lives, but also domestic, private lives. Museums can also assess their current holdings, reexamining artifacts in the collection in order to determine which are representative of women’s experiences. Additionally, as found at the Cape Fear Museum, incomplete research and cataloging of artifacts might be a barrier to finding and accessing items of interest to women’s history. Thorough research of the collection and careful cataloging to include as much of the provenance and history as possible can promote easier access when using electronic cataloging software to find artifacts. Despite early barriers to collecting women’s history, such as the early male-centered focus on the Civil War, and those to accessing it, such as incomplete research and cataloging, artifacts documenting women’s lives exist in the Cape Fear Museum and likely exist in many museum’s collections. At the Cape Fear Museum, the intersection of race and gender is a topic to further explore, assess the collection for, and fill gaps as needed.

Available and accessible collections relating to women’s history are crucial to more effective interpretations; however, there are other challenges to its interpretation at the Cape Fear Museum. The museum has, understandably given Wilmington’s racialized history, placed a focus on interpreting the history of race and race relations, as demonstrated by the coverage given to topics of slavery, Civil War, Reconstruction, and segregation. Interpreting race and gender together could help make connections, create opportunities to include more women’s

\textsuperscript{251} Draft Collections Plan, Collections Planning files, Collections Department, Cape Fear Museum.
history while continuing to interpret the complicated racial history of the region, and provide a more complete picture of life in the Cape Fear region.

The Cape Fear Museum is also representative of the common issues found in other museums’ interpretations of women. Lack of inclusion is an issue in the museum’s earliest exhibition sections, creating the sense that women’s history did not exist in the colonial era and the early years of the republic. Other sections of the exhibit, however, present an unbalanced interpretation of women by focusing on their public and notable roles without contextualizing them and interpreting a wider variety of women’s experiences. The Cape Fear Museum’s interpretation faces the same challenges as many other museums, such as lack of primary sources about women’s lives and lack of secondary sources on women’s local or regional experiences. These challenges are difficult to overcome due to the staff time required to research women’s lives without scholarship as a guide. However, drawing on strategies from the field of public history to expose the process of piecing together evidence can show visitors what is known and what is not, but still offer reasonable hypotheses about women’s lives in the region. Furthermore, contextualizing women with the concept of the total woman can help to ensure that a balanced interpretation of women is presented.

The Cape Fear Museum’s proposed new exhibit on women’s businesses likewise provides a model of considerations for other history museums. The question of integrated versus separate raises issues of focus, long-term improvements, and relative importance of women’s history. While a separate exhibit places women’s history outside of the dominant narrative and physically segregates it, it also offers an opportunity to delve deeply into that history. Museums must consider practical issues in terms of cost, staff time, and other resources; however, integrated exhibits that present the multiplicity of perspectives of the past should be the ultimate
goal. The case study presented here offers a model of finding resources and conducting research that should prove useful to other museums.

The considerations presented above to better interpret women’s history at the Cape Fear Museum can be applied not only to interpreting women’s history at other museums, but also to interpreting other topics including masculinity and LGBT history. The preceding chapters have focused on the current representation of women’s history, and the resources and strategies available to include women’s history in the context of gender as a major category of analysis of the past. They have also emphasized the need to consider the full range of lived experiences of women including women who worked in the home as well as those who worked outside it, women in “traditional” roles and women who stood out, women of various races, classes, backgrounds. These same tactics could be applied in the interpretation of not only of women but also of men’s lives, of masculinity, and LGBT history. Through these considerations, museums can present a more complicated narrative that explains how gender roles and expectations have influenced the past and continue to influence us today.

As with women’s history, academic history has begun producing bodies of scholarship on masculinity, shifting women’s studies departments to gender studies departments, studying the history of same-sex relationships, third genders, and other gender identities and sexual orientations as they existed in the past. Gender means going beyond merely adding women into the story. Instead, gender history means looking at men and women in relationship to one

---

another, what gender roles and expectations were placed on them, the power relations between them, and how some people stood outside of the traditional binary.

Despite the growing body of scholarship dealing with the history of gender and sexuality, these resources have only marginally begun to affect public history presented in museums and historic sites. Some museums have begun the process of incorporating LGBT history. Museums Australia has established a policy explicitly calling for more inclusive interpretation. Their policy explains their motivations for the gay and lesbian policy as being “an essential way for museums in Australia to address the needs of people who have also been traditionally marginalised by the dominant culture. Their stories and cultural history have been largely ignored, forgotten or repressed but with growing self-identification, the gay and lesbian communities are now seen as an important part of the culturally-diverse matrix of Australian society.”

The guidelines point to the need to make explicit plans for how to incorporate historically-marginalized populations into all aspects and departments of an institution by outlining how improvements can be made in collections, education, programming, and outreach. In an era in which issues of sex, gender, and sexuality abound in the media, museums can offer relevant information and increase visitors’ understanding of the history of these issues.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:


Bellamy, Mary Dixon. Interview by LuAnn Mims and Gerald Parnell. 24 May 2005. UNCW Archives and Special Collections Online Database. University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina.


“Cape Fear Museum Exhibits.” Database. Collections Department. Cape Fear Museum of Science and History, Wilmington, NC.


“Copy of Diary from a Scrap Book of Sarah Elizabeth Mercer (Later Married to Edward W. Taylor) Kept During a Part of the Civil War.” Transcription of Diary of Sarah Elizabeth Mercer Taylor. New Hanover County Library, North Carolina Room Collection LPCF #977.


Permanent Collection, Cape Fear Museum of History and Science, Wilmington, North Carolina.


Survey of visitors to Cape Fear Museum of Science and History, 2014-2015. (20 total responses)


Wilmington, N.C. City Directories. New Hanover County Public Library North Carolina Room, Wilmington, North Carolina.


127


Secondary Sources:


Appendix A
Visitor Survey Tool
What words or images come to mind when you hear the words “women’s history?”

What words or images come to mind when you hear the word “gender?”

How would you rate your interest in women’s history on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being not interested and 5 being very interested?

Would you like to see more information about women's lives in the exhibits here?

What would you like to know more about (in terms of women’s history)?

What kinds of objects, photos, or information would you expect to see in an exhibit focused on women’s history?

What kinds of objects, photos, or information would you expect to see in an exhibit about gender?
What is your zip code? ______

What is your age?

__18-24 __ 25-30 __ 30-39 __ 40-49 __ 50-59 __ 60-69 __ 70-79 __ 80+

How do you identify your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply.)

__ Black or African American
__ White
__ American Indian or Alaska Native
__ Hispanic or Latino/a
__ Asian
__ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
__ Other

How do you identify your gender? (Check all that apply.)

__ Man
__ Woman
__ Trans*
__ Other ______

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

For more information about the study you may contact:

Beth Bullock, graduate student researcher

emb2640@uncw.edu 252-281-3564

Tammy Gordon, thesis director, Associate Professor of History, University of North Carolina Wilmington

gordont@uncw.edu 910-962-4244

Candace Gauthier, Institutional Review Board Chair

gauthierc@uncw.edu 910-962-3558