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Historic Preservation®



WOODLAWN  
AND  
POPE-LEIGHEY HOUSE



**SMA**  
Small Museum Association

40TH ANNUAL  
CONFERENCE

Omni Richmond Hotel  
Richmond, VA

February 19-21, 2024

**TELLING TOUGH  
STORIES**



# Ethical Interpretation of History

FEBRUARY 20, 2024

# WHAT IS INTERPRETATION?

A purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with the world around us.

(National Association for Interpretation, 2021)



Woodlawn Tour

Image: Woodlawn & Pope-Leighey House



# McLeod Plantation Historic Site

McLeod Plantation Historic Site's purpose is to preserve and share the history of enslaved people and their descendants in their on-going struggle to achieve freedom and justice. Opened April 2015.

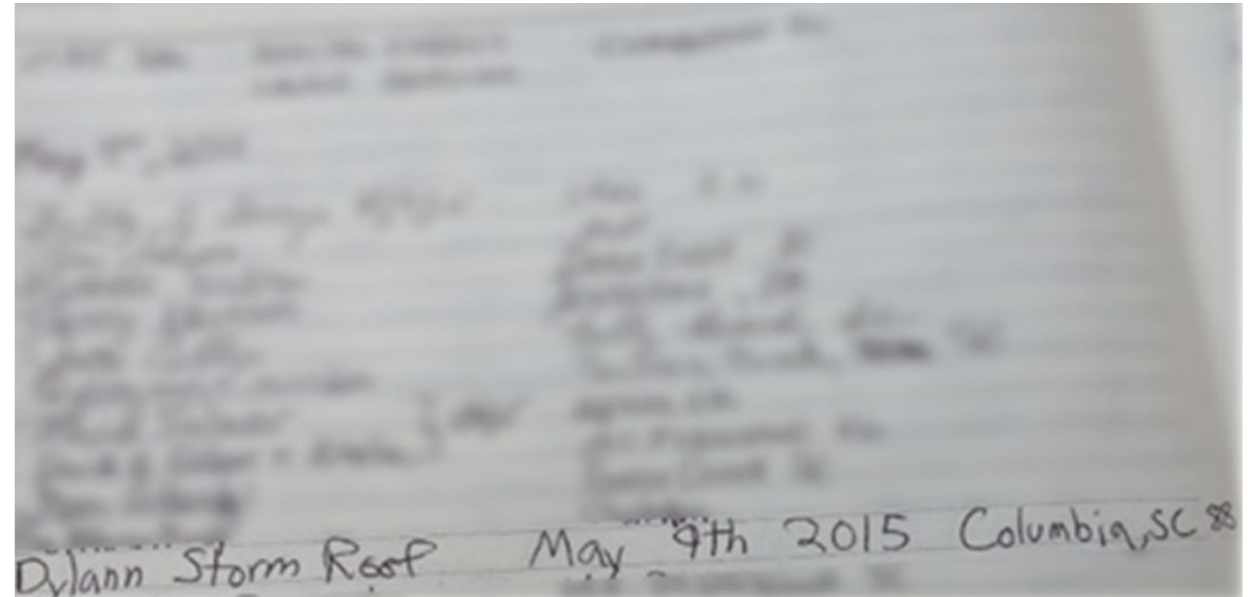


First Cohort of Interpreters at McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Image: Shawn Halifax

# McLeod Plantation Historic Site

McLeod Plantation Historic Site's purpose is to preserve and share the history of enslaved people and their descendants in their on-going struggle to achieve freedom and justice. Opened April 2015.



Visitor Sign-in Book at McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Image: Shawn Halifax

# Ethical History Interpretation: A Definition

Ethical Interpretation addresses histories of people whose experiences have been under or mis-represented and does so by recognizing their individuality, achievement, and challenges. Ethical Interpretation involves collaboration with the community being interpreted, and connects past, present, and future conditions for learners.

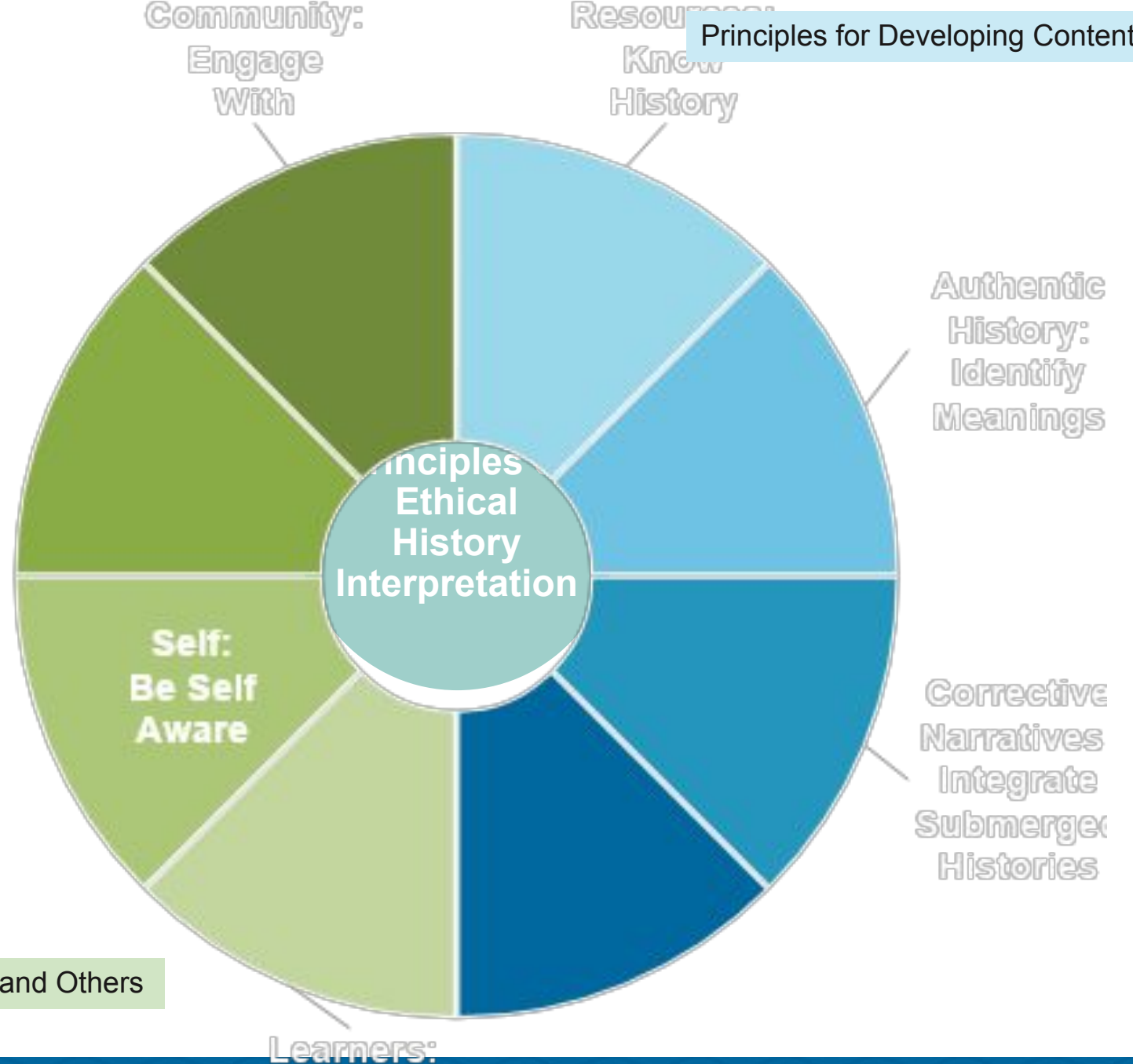
*Smithsonian's National Museum of African  
American History and Culture*



National Museum of African American  
History and Culture, Washington, DC

Image: Smithsonian NMAAHC

# Eight Principles for Ethical Interpretation



Principles for Interacting with Self and Others



# Resources

## Know History

- Have a firm grounding in vetted scholarship and knowledge of your museum/site's history and its resources and their relevance to the present and possible future.
- Site your sources.
- Possess historical thinking skills and an understanding of the historiography of the topic being interpreted.



W. E. Du Bois  
National Portrait Gallery

# Resources

## Know History

- Oral histories are valid. Problems with accuracy are the same for oral histories as for other source materials.
- Employ concentric research - provide site specific evidence and radiate geographically outward, when appropriate.



W. E. Du Bois  
National Portrait Gallery



# Authentic History

## Identify Meanings

- Facilitate learners' discovery of personal meanings and symbolic connections (intangibles) to the people, places, events, and things of the past (tangibles).
- Acknowledge incompleteness due to lack of information and understand that all sources are biased.



Fingerprints  
Image: Bill Kund

# Authentic History

## Identify Meanings

- Recognize our understanding of the past is fluid, only bringing us to a proximity.
- Connect learners with the people, places, events, and things of the past by revealing their relevancy and significance to the present and possible future.

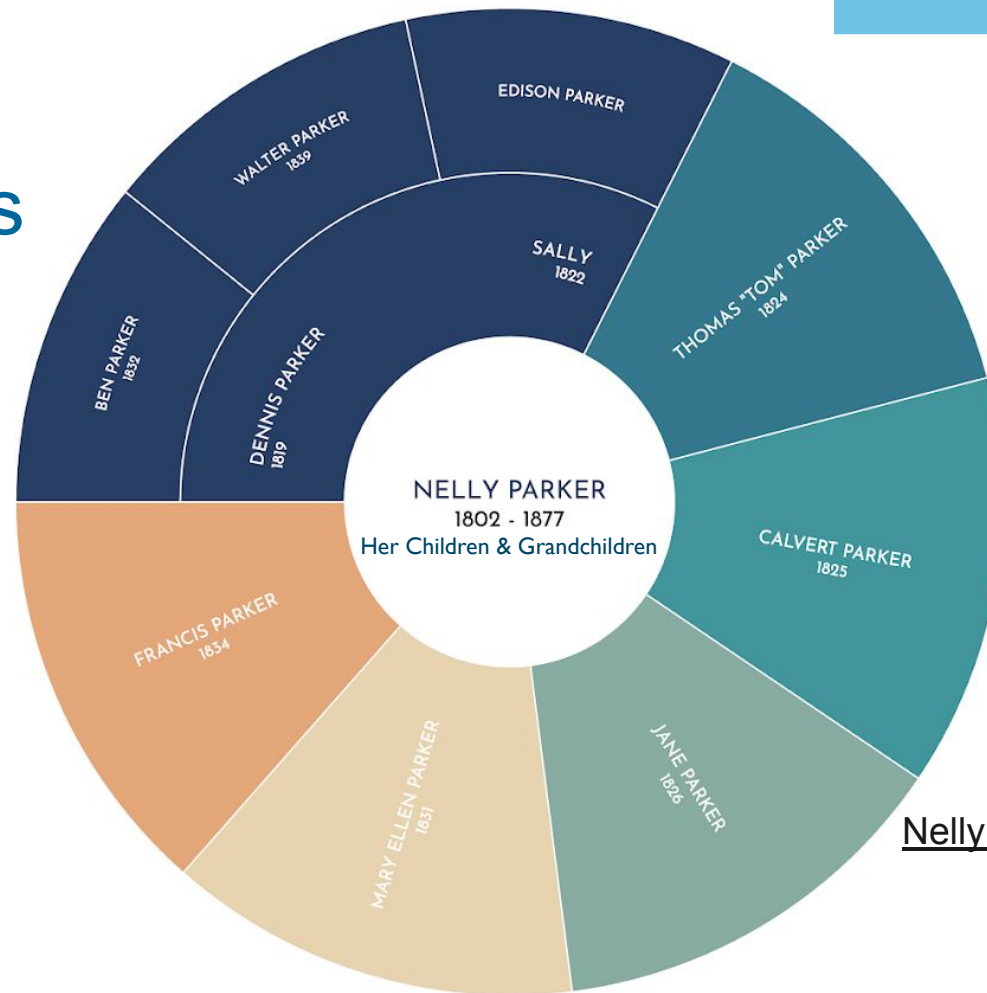


Fingerprints  
Image: Bill Kund

# Corrective Narratives

## Integrate submerged histories

- Tell stories with a beginning, middle, and conclusion.
- Do not devolve into the minutia.
- Share meaningful and integrated stories that may correct traditional narratives.



### Nelly Parker (1802-1877)

Her parents  
Joe Dolcey

Her siblings

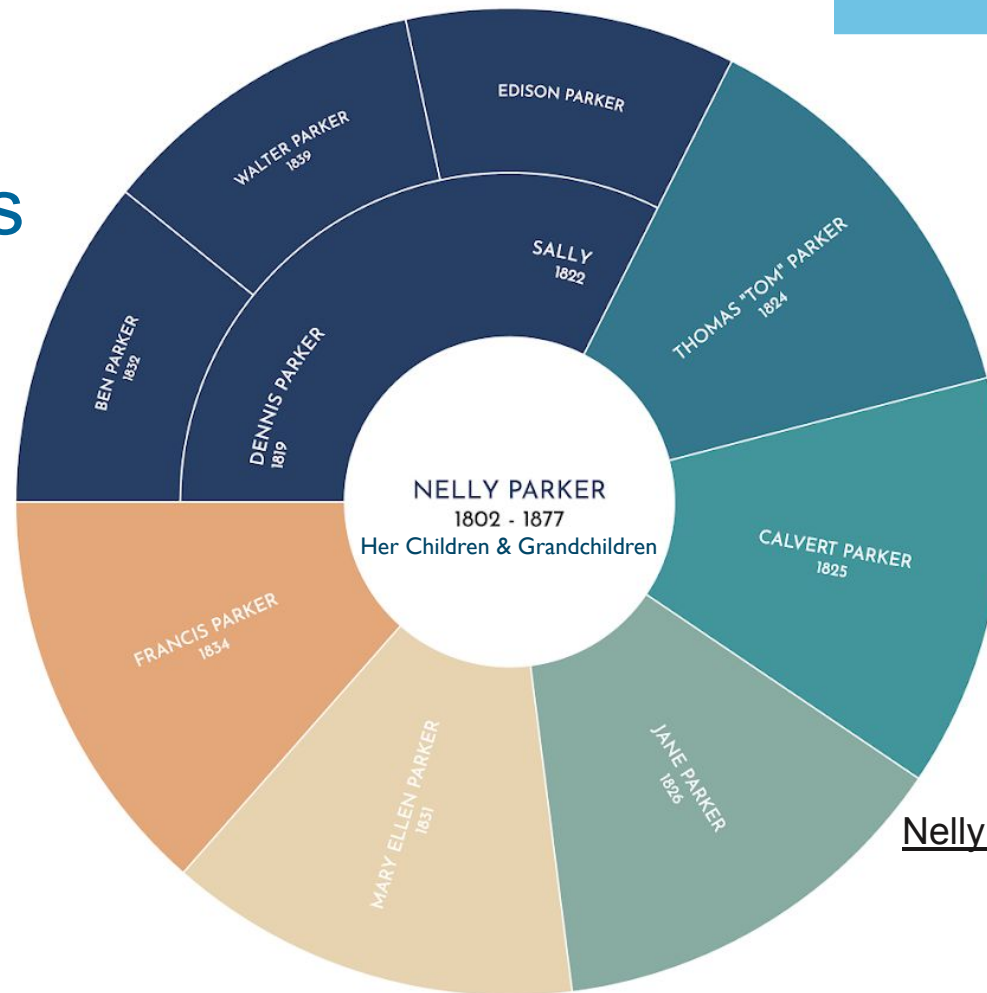
Sukey	Dennis
b.1794	b.1799



# Corrective Narratives

## Integrate submerged histories

- Do not avoid tension or stories that remain unresolved.
- Use multiple sources and include alternative perspectives to help mitigate bias.
- Use a thematic approach when crafting interpretation.



Nelly Parker (1802-1877)

Her parents  
Joe Dolcey

Her siblings

Sukey b.1794	Dennis b.1799
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# People of the Past

## Reveal the Whole Person

- Present historically excluded and underrepresented people in their fundamental human dignity.
- Present people within the contextual complexity of their experiences.
- Create opportunities for learners to develop empathy and compassion for historically excluded people of the past and their descendants in the present.



Lewis Quander  
Image: The Quander Family

# People of the Past

## Reveal the Whole Person

- Balance trauma with triumph; and pain with pride.
- Do not exploit trauma.



Lewis Quander  
Image: The Quander Family



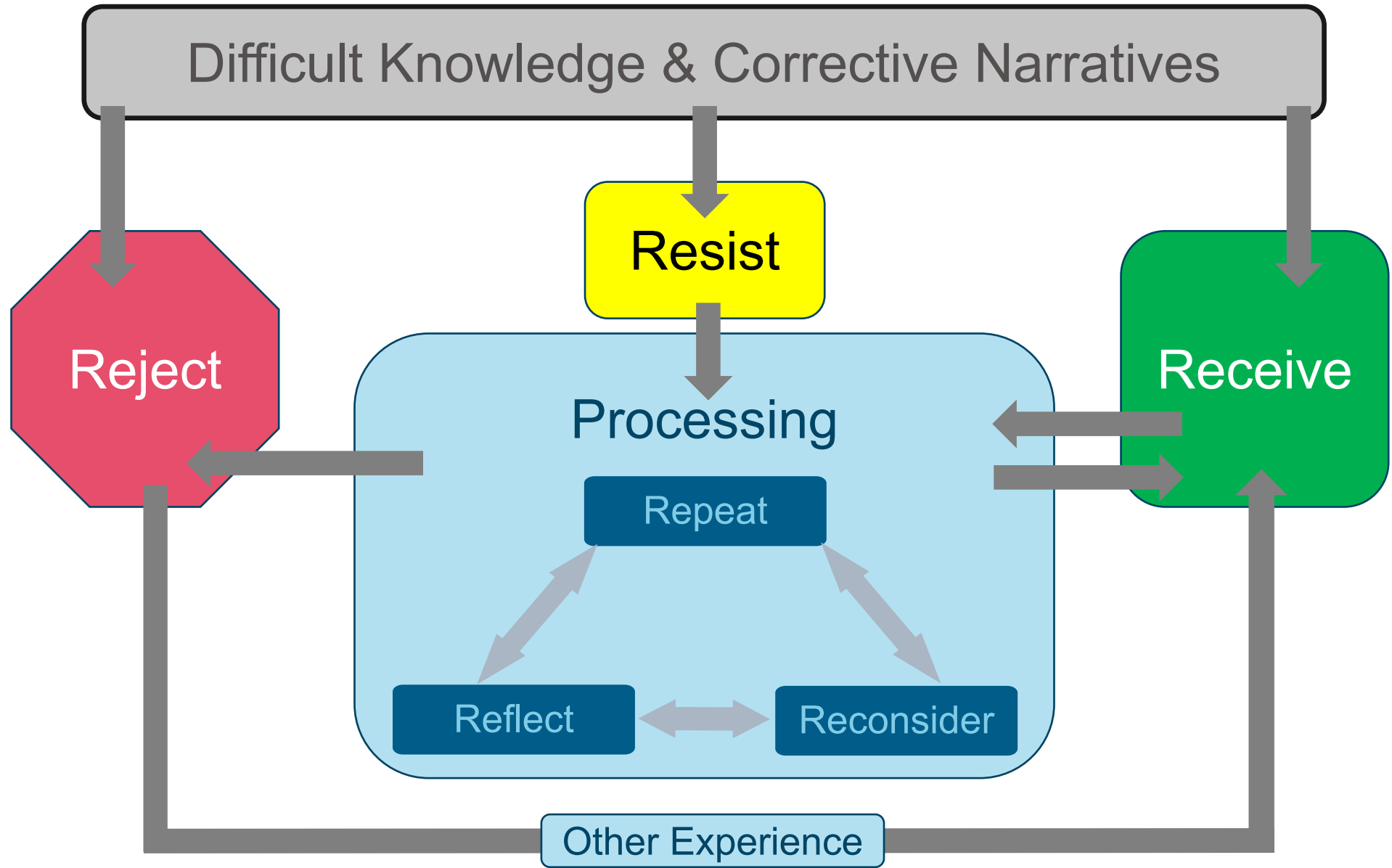
# Meeting Learners Where They Are

- Prepare for and recognize discomfort in learners created by difficult knowledge that contradicts or conflicts with their existing knowledge.
- Recognize these stories can be unsettling because they reference lived and /or generational trauma.



Woodlawn Tour  
Image: Woodlawn & Pope-Leighey House

Learners  
*Meet them where they are*



Adapted from Dr. Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History*

# Meeting Learners Where They Are

- Employ a dialogic approach to provide learners time and space for reflection, conversation, questions, and sharing of their experiences and relationship to the history.

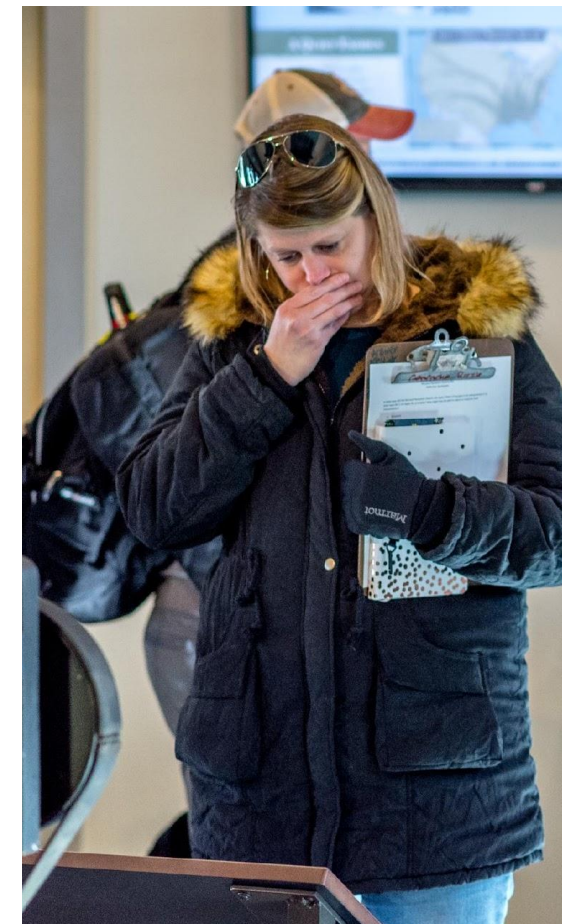


Woodlawn Tour  
Woodlawn & Pope-Leighey House



# Be Self Aware

- Reflect on thoughts, feelings, and experiences around the history you are sharing and its intersection with modern issues.
- Read about, listen to, then participate in discussions about the history you are sharing with people that do and do not think like you.
- Recognize your discomfort from the contradictions and conflicts of history.
- Prepare for your responses to learners' responses to new knowledge.
- Practice self-care.



Welcome Center at McLeod  
Plantation Historic Site  
Image: Smithsonian NMAAHC

# Support Each Other

- Promote organizational support for frontline workers well-being.
- Support the well-being of your colleagues.
- Become part of a community of practice.



Ethical Interpretation Workshop  
Image: Smithsonian NMAAHC

# Build Trust and Involve the Community

- Build trust through personal and organizational relationships with individuals and communities whose history is being interpreted.
- Involve the community whose history is to be interpreted in research.
- Involve the community whose history is being interpreted in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of interpretation.



Captain Dave Richardson Tells His Family's Story  
at McLeod Plantation Historic Site

Image: Jeff Muse



## Eight Principles for the Ethical Interpretation of History

Principles for Developing Content				Principles for Interacting with Others & Ourselves			
Resources <i>Know history</i>	Authentic History <i>Identify meanings</i>	Corrective Narratives <i>Integrate submerged histories</i>	People of the Past <i>Reveal the whole person</i>	Learners <i>Meet them where they are</i>	Self <i>Be self-aware</i>	Colleagues <i>Provide support</i>	Community <i>Engage with</i>
<p>Have a firm grounding in vetted scholarship &amp; knowledge of your museum/site's history &amp; its resources &amp; their relevance to the present &amp; possible future.</p> <p>Cite your sources.</p> <p>Possess historical thinking skills &amp; an understanding of the historiography of the topic being interpreted.</p> <p>Oral histories are valid. Problems with accuracy are the same for oral histories as other sources.</p> <p>Employ concentric research - provide site specific evidence &amp; radiate geographically outward, when appropriate.</p>	<p>Facilitate learners' discovery of personal meanings &amp; symbolic connections (intangibles) to the people, places, events, &amp; things of the past (tangibles).</p> <p>Acknowledge incompleteness due to lack of information &amp; understand that all sources are biased.</p> <p>Recognize our understanding of the past is fluid, only bringing us to a proximity.</p> <p>Connect learners with the people, places, events, &amp; things of the past by revealing their relevancy &amp; significance to the present &amp; possible future.</p>	<p>Tell stories with a beginning, middle, &amp; conclusion.</p> <p>Do not devolve into the minutia.</p> <p>Share meaningful &amp; integrated stories that may correct traditional narratives.</p> <p>Do not avoid tension or stories that remain unresolved.</p> <p>Use multiple sources and include alternative perspectives to help mitigate bias.</p> <p>Use a thematic approach when crafting interpretation.</p>	<p>Present historically excluded &amp; underrepresented people in their fundamental human dignity.</p> <p>Present people within the contextual complexity of their experiences.</p> <p>Create opportunities for learners to develop empathy &amp; compassion for historically excluded &amp; underrepresented people of the past &amp; their descendants in the present.</p> <p>Balance trauma with triumph &amp; pain with pride.</p> <p>Do not exploit trauma.</p>	<p>Prepare for &amp; recognize discomfort in learners created by difficult knowledge that contradicts or conflicts with their existing knowledge.</p> <p>Recognize these stories can be unsettling because they reference lived &amp;/or generational trauma.</p> <p>Employ a dialogic approach to provide learners time &amp; space for reflection, conversation, questions, &amp; sharing of their experiences &amp; relationship to the history.</p>	<p>Reflect on thoughts, feelings, &amp; experiences around the history you are sharing &amp; its intersection with modern issues.</p> <p>Read about, listen to, then participate in discussions about the history you are sharing with people that do &amp; do not think like you.</p> <p>Recognize your own discomfort from the contradictions &amp; conflicts of history.</p> <p>Prepare for your responses to learners' responses to difficult knowledge.</p> <p>Practice self-care.</p>	<p>Promote institutional support for frontline workers well-being.</p> <p>Support the well-being of colleagues.</p> <p>Become part of a community of practice.</p>	<p>Build trust through personal &amp; organizational relationships with individuals &amp; communities whose history is being interpreted.</p> <p>Involve the community whose history is to be interpreted in research.</p> <p>Involve the community whose history is being interpreted in the planning, delivery, &amp; evaluation of interpretation.</p>

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# A Few Resources

Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture's Ethical Interpretation Workshop <https://nmaahc.si.edu/connect/strategic-partnerships>

National Trust for Historic Preservation's *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites: A Rubric of Best Practices*  
<https://Montpelier-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/Interpreting%20Slavery%2010-30-18.pdf>

American Association for State and Local History's Interpreting History Series  
<https://aaslh.org/aaslh-introduces-new-book-series-interpreting-history-series/>

American Association for State and Local History's STEPS Program  
<https://aaslh.org/professional-development/steps/>

International Coalition of Sites of Conscience <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/>

# Contact

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## Articles and Essays

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Halifax, Shawn and Terri Snyder. “Slavery, Resistance, and Memory in the Lowcountry: The Commemoration of the Stono Rebellion,” *Fugitive Movements: Commemorating the Denmark Vesey Affair and Black Radical Antislavery in the Atlantic World*, edited by James Spady, University of South Carolina Press, 2022, pp. 136-160.

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