



# 04 Linking the Present with the Past through Intangible Heritage in History Museums

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss how the New Jersey Historical Society has used the strategy of documenting intangible heritage in its exhibitions to engage both audiences who understand the mission of an historical museum and those who have not grown up with history and historical institutions as part of their lives. Intangible culture also personalizes popular and mass cultural items, animates exhibitions, and creates links between contemporary life and the state's past for diverse urban audiences. From *Teenage New Jersey, 1942-1975* to *Dining In, Dining Out, What Exit? New Jersey and Its Turnpike* to *New Jersey Remembers September 11, 2001*, exhibitions have presented dance, specialized language/jargon, jokes, eating practices, local traditions and lore, stories, songs, and memories along with material culture. This paper examines how this has altered our presentation of history and helped diversify our audiences as well as having had implications for staffing, collecting and collections maintenance. Finally, this device has allowed us to form what might be viewed as an 'identity repository' – a repository of documents that speak not only to the values, practices and identity of distinct ethnic groups but also to what it is that constitutes a New Jerseyan.

Believing that the lives of contemporary peoples and their cultures provide a window on to the past and an effective vehicle by which to reach non-traditional audiences for history, over the past ten years the New Jersey Historical Society has been documenting and presenting aspects of intangible cultural heritage through our exhibitions and programmes. With UNESCO's adoption of the Convention

for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Culture Heritage, it seems an appropriate time to take a step back, examine this practice, look at what its results have been, and see what implications it has for our institution and others like it.

Since the mid-1990s, we have been making our resources accessible to local and state-wide communities through exhibitions, programmes, and

collections access projects. Our approach has been an active one – we created both exhibitions and programmes that tackle topics selected because they engage a broad public’s imagination and emotions. They address present-day issues, expressions, and ideas and link them to history. In particular, we have tied the present to the past through intangible heritage and found that the documentation and presentation of traditions, memories and stories enhances our presentation of history and allows us to engage a diversity of people from disparate backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

The New Jersey Historical Society, a museum, library, and archives with the mission of preserving and documenting the history of the mid-Atlantic state of New Jersey, is the oldest cultural institution in the state. We are comparable to a regional museum in other countries, with the region, in our case, defined politically by the state’s boundaries.

New Jersey is located between two of the Eastern seaboard’s largest metropolitan centres, New York and Philadelphia. Many of its residents rely upon one of those two cities for their livelihood. Much of the state is made up of small towns and suburban communities, many of which are tied more to the larger urban centres in contiguous states, such as New York and Philadelphia, than to cities in New Jersey.

New Jersey’s cities declined dramatically in the twentieth century. Once major industrial centres, the cities lost much of their industrial base as industries modernized, consolidated, and moved to other parts of the country. Left with largely low-income populations, these cities continue to struggle to regain their earlier economic strength without the advantages of a strong industrial/revenue base.

The Historical Society, since its founding in 1845, has been located in Newark, the state’s largest city. Newark

is located in northeastern New Jersey, eight miles from New York City. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Newark was the third largest city in the United States and one of its foremost industrial centers. Over the course of the century, as industries relocated and populations shifted, Newark was left without adequate sources of employment for its diverse population.

Newark is ethnically and racially diverse, with 56.3% of its 270,000 population African American (non-Hispanic), 25.2% Hispanic, and 18.5% that identify with other groups. Although Newark is undergoing revitalization, a survey by Zero Population Growth issued in 1999 ranked the city as the worst United States city in which to raise children. More than 37% of its children and 26.3% of its entire population live below the federal poverty level. Of the city’s adult population, 27.5% have high school diplomas and 8.5% college degrees. In dramatic contrast, New Jersey, with 8.4 million people, is the most densely populated and wealthiest state in the nation: 74.6% of its population is white, 13.1% African American, 9.2% Hispanic, and 3.1% Asian.

Our challenge, then, was and is, to present history both to audiences who understand our mission and to those who have not grown up knowing historical societies and museums; to relate to both urban and suburban groups; and to reflect the city and the state’s increasing ethnic and cultural diversity without losing our appeal to our existing visitors. To meet these challenges we draw upon stories and expressive culture from New Jerseyans. This strategy allows us to create a bridge between the past and the present, thereby developing the contextual framework for understanding both certain aspects of New Jersey history as well as traditional historical objects and documents.

Our documentation of intangible culture is focused, like our collecting of objects, largely through the

exhibitions we develop. The kinds of intangible material we collect vary from exhibition to exhibition and are driven, in large part, by our choice of exhibition topics. The topics are determined in a long range planning process. Our goal in developing exhibitions is to treat areas of American history that are especially relevant to the state of New Jersey and it's residents, topics for which New Jerseyans have particularly compelling stories to tell. We also use exhibitions to build both our museum and archival collections, especially twentieth, and now twenty-first, century materials.

Some exhibitions create an opportunity to present and document folk and ethnic traditions and to examine how they have changed in an American context. *Moving through Memory: Caribbean Folk Arts in New Jersey* documented the folk arts of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Jamaican and Haitian cultures and examined ways in which their traditions have been changed and enriched as the groups adapt to their New Jersey home. Tangible culture – musical instrument-making, decorative leatherwork, piñatas with popular cultural characters, costumes for Dominican Independence Day

celebrations, and painting – as well as less tangible culture (the music itself, arts of home decoration, parades, hair styles, murals and decorated store fronts) demonstrated the changes in tradition that occur when groups move from one place to another and adapt to their new circumstances and environment.

While *Moving through Memory* documented folk arts within a context of migration and change, another exhibition, *Dining In, Dining Out*, looked at traditions from a broader range of cultural groups, examining how traditions involving food and dining sustain family and community life. We collected information and artifacts relating to family dinners, community suppers, and eating in diners, and, as a result, were able to present a diversity of contemporary traditions in the exhibition.

Family dinners were discussed first in a contemporary context – a partially recreated kitchen where drawers in a sideboard represented different family traditions and displayed the foodstuffs, spices, and utensils used in the preparation or consumption of each, as well as family photographs. The evolution of ethnic food traditions in America was demonstrated, for

**Figure 1:** An image of the sideboard whose drawers represented different family traditions and displayed foodstuffs, spices, and utensils used in the preparation or consumption of each.



**Figure 2-1:** The section of the exhibition that juxtaposed a TV tray and frozen dinner with a TV showing movie and television excerpts of family dinners and raised issues relating to the viability of the family dinner in contemporary society.

**Figure 2-2:** The section of the exhibition that displayed photos and told stories relating to the chow mein noodles sold to benefit the Japanese community's Buddhist temple in Seabrook, New Jersey.



Figure 3: This one depicts the introductory area of our "Teenage New Jersey" exhibition .



example, with spaghetti 'stuffing,' a pasta side dish that one Italian-American family developed to accompany the traditional American Thanksgiving turkey, and the persistence of tradition could be seen in the Puerto Rican pasteles-making that is very much a part of Christmas celebrations in both Puerto Rico and New Jersey. Stories and recipes accompanied each display and visitors were encouraged to add stories of their own family traditions in a 'story bowl' on a nearby kitchen table.

The history of the American family dinner, which followed in the exhibition, gave a longer-range perspective to the contemporary display as it portrayed how the traditions of family dining have changed as waves of immigration increasingly diversified New Jersey and America's population and life styles changed. Movie and television excerpts depicting family dinners (both contemporary and historical) exposed the diversity of interactions that occur when families gather around food. Juxtaposed with a TV tray and frozen dinner, these clips also helped raise questions about the viability of the family dinner in contemporary society.

Exhibition sections on community suppers and eating in the neighbourhood diner (a type of restaurant that New Jerseyans feel is typical of their state) offered opportunities for exploring other kinds of communal traditions. For example, after World War II a number of Japanese former internment camp inmates settled in Seabrook, New Jersey, and founded a Buddhist temple. In the early 1950s, in order to raise money to support the temple, they decided to sell food. As John Fuyuum, a Seabrook community member remembers, they came to be 'chow mein' dinners –

.... because in the early days, there was no such thing as a Japanese restaurant...nobody knew about

sushi....In those days, if you talked about sashimi – raw fish – they'd go 'ugh' you know. So, they went to the Chinese end of it. But I understand that chow mein isn't Chinese, either – it's an American invention!

This variant on the American church supper is still a distinctive component of the Seabrook community and stories and recipes from community members expose the complexity of ethnicity in a global society. In this case as in many others in the exhibition, the personal stories and traditions allowed us to penetrate both the social and the cultural significance of the everyday events.

Other exhibitions have used intangible heritage to personalize mass-produced artefacts and give them a local relevance. The exhibition *Teenage New Jersey* traced the history of growing up in the state from 1942 to 1975, roughly between the times when New Jersey entertainer Frank Sinatra was all the rage to the emergence of Bruce Springsteen as a popular music star. While some of the material collected was hand-made (e.g. tokens of devotion that teenage girls made out of chewing gum wrappers for their boy friends), much of what we collected and displayed was commercially produced.

For example, in the 1950s after New York's Madison Avenue marketing specialists identified teenagers as potential sales targets, objects and clothing were created for this age group, and magazines and stores began to cater for it. Our exhibition featured such items as a mini-dress that had been shown on the cover of *Seventeen* magazine – still a proud possession of the woman who lent it to us. Although mass-produced and most likely distributed throughout the United States if not also in Europe, items like the *Seventeen* magazine dress took on special meaning and local significance through the

stories that their owners told us and that accompanied the objects in the exhibitions. In fact, it was the intangible culture – the stories, traditions, music, slang, and dance – that made this exhibition distinctively ‘New Jersey’ by demonstrating how such items of popular culture can become localized through being used and associated with a particular place or social group.

*Teenage New Jersey* also collected many traditions and stories focused upon teen culture as it developed in America. Traditions of dress, rituals, rites of passage, and customs related to grooming and dating – all of these intangible elements were key to the exhibition’s exploration of teen culture.

For American girls in the 1950s, for example, bedrooms were their private refuges, for studying, doing their hair, or slumber or ‘pyjama parties,’ get-togethers where groups of girls spent the night at one young woman’s house. The words of people who were teenagers at the time helped explain the latter custom: Yvonne Berce Jones from Orange, New Jersey recalled, that in the late 1940s ‘...it was the beginning of the pyjama parties. My father said, “what do you want to go to a pyjama party for, you have a perfectly good bed here!” So that was the end of that.’ Marlene Greco from Rutherford, New Jersey, was allowed to attend these parties and remembered that in the 1950s –

We would wear our baby dolls [‘baby doll’ pyjamas were hip-length smocked tops worn with matching

frilly panties] and have a pyjama party. It was always supposed to be a secret from the boys, but of course, [they] always found out about it. They’d come knocking at our window, and all of the girls would run around screaming.

While bringing to life apparently silly or superficial teenage customs, these comments also raise issues related to parental supervision and gender and communicate broadly while documenting easily ignored aspects of teenage life.

In the exhibition’s section on high school, we not only treated practices that developed around different realms of activity in school, we also discussed dress and slang, in particular the words and phrases that each generation of students develops to characterise their peers. As New Jerseyan Jeff Wolber remembered, in the 1950s –

There were large groups of people who were clique-ish. We had the preppies and the greasers. The preppies wore ties and madras shirts; the greasers wore the wing-tip shoes and slicked back hair.

In the exhibition, a blackboard grid with a horizontal listing of the decades from the 1940s to the 1990s and a vertical listing of ‘types’ helped us collect some of the names that teenagers used for studious people, for students who were good at sports, for counter-culture

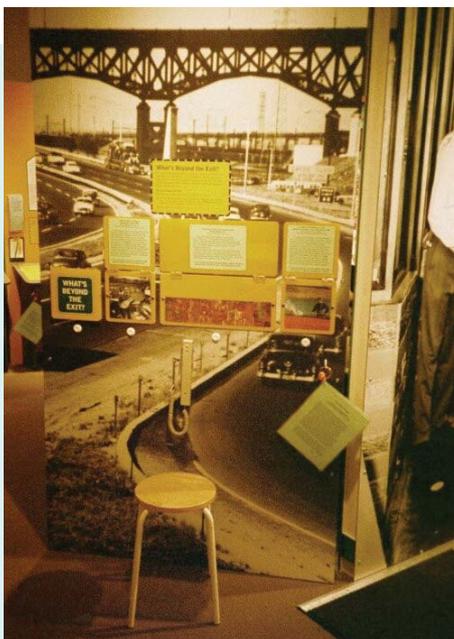
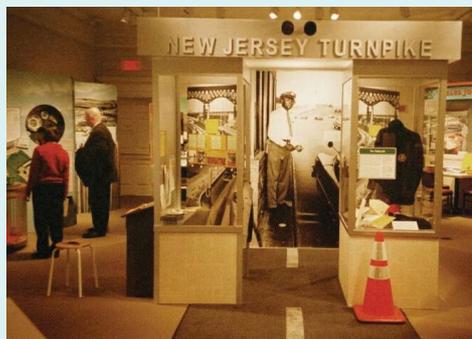


Figure 4-1(Right): A general illustration for the exhibition.

Figure 4-2(Left): The section of the exhibition that featured stories about the traditions observed by communities that border the turnpike.



types, for outsiders and insiders, for clean-cut students and for students who were tough. We found it also promoted conversation between the generations of exhibition visitors.

The New Jersey Turnpike – the super highway and toll road that runs almost from one end of the state to the other – is arguably the state’s largest artifact. Our exhibition *What Exit? New Jersey and Its Turnpike* examined the history of that road on its fiftieth anniversary. This enormous post World War II construction project not only changed the face of New Jersey permanently, but also spawned its own folklore – a changing body of stories and traditions that are used to characterise the roadway by people who work on and around it, individuals who drive it, and people who have never seen it. The Turnpike has become, for many, symbolic of the state in both positive and negative ways. The title of the exhibition itself, *What Exit?* is from a joke that implies that the state of New Jersey is no more than a series of exit ramps off of the Turnpike.

We wanted our exhibition to explore not only how roads have changed American life and the history of New Jersey’s most famous roadway, but also the meaning that the roadway has for the state’s residents and the image that the state projects to the rest of the country and the world. Again, we turned to the documentation of intangible heritage to accomplish these goals and thus to distinguish New Jersey’s highway from the countless others in the nation and around the world.

With the help of the organisation that manages the roadway, we first contacted all current and former employees of the turnpike – the people who built the road, those who repair it, the men and women who operate its toll booths, the technicians who monitor its traffic, the police who patrol it, and the people who serve food and pump gas in its service areas. We then surveyed this group, asking them to share their stories with us, and, after sifting through the hundreds of responses, we interviewed a representative group of employees. Their stories, incorporated in the exhibition, documented the work culture and the meaning of the road to those who helped create it and who continue to maintain it.

Many people travel the length of New Jersey on the Turnpike and seldom see more of the state than the concession stands and gas stations in the road’s service areas. Yet many of these individuals give meaning to the roadway. Cynthia Jones, a Bronx, New York, resident recalled summer trips during her youth –

... travelling to South Carolina in August. Many blacks who traveled in August were going back to their roots, back to the South, to South Carolina, for ‘Big Meeting,’ which is a reunion of sorts. Usually you’d meet on Sunday at church, so you’d often have these caravans of cars travelling south...basically the use of the Turnpike was to gas up, to begin the trip, or to meet others who were going to be traveling on the road down. So it was a meeting place.

Truckers who travel the route as part of their job have a different perspective as Dave Borngesser of APA Transport testifies:

As soon as you get between [Exits] 13A and 13B...it’s got to be the busiest section...you have everything between Newark and Elizabeth: industry; you have the ports; you have the food distributors, Shop-Rite is there – and Shop-Rite puts out probably 4,000 trailers a day, and so you can imagine what’s coming in from the rest of the states, to bring the meat in, bring the products in – Shop-Rite doesn’t make this food, it’s brought to them and they distribute it, so there’s a bunch of trucks going out of there on a daily basis.

We also wanted to address the impression common to many of these travelers that the state is not much more than the asphalt roadway, so we researched the cultures and traditions of communities along the road. Many of these were highlighted in a special section of the exhibition – muskrat hunting and cranberry harvesting in the southern part of the state, competitive car driving in a local ‘Road-eo’ mid-state and a multi-national African supper in a Newark church.

Finally, to learn about general public attitudes to the Turnpike, we not only interviewed both residents and travellers who use the road but also sent post cards to people across the country. We found married couples who had met and eventually married as a result of the roadway, children who were conceived and born on it and families who fondly remembered many a Sunday afternoon drive exploring the road.

The practice of drawing upon stories and traditions for our exhibition material has allowed us to tackle subjects for which we lacked actual objects and, in some cases, for which objects are difficult, if not impossible to acquire. Another exhibition, *Pride of Newark* traced the story of two baseball teams – the Negro League Eagles and the

Bears, a farm team of the New York Yankees – that played in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s. It examined how the racial segregation that separated the two teams – they shared the same playing field yet never played on the same day, or to the same crowds, or challenged one another – also shaped many other aspects of life at the time. Segregation determined where people could live as well as where they could shop, seek entertainment, and associate. Stories about sports teams, shopping and jazz clubs brought to life a time when lives were separated by race in a way that is unimaginable for many Americans today. These stories often evoked the texture of social life that is missing from other kinds of documentation of the period.

One former Newarker, for example, told us that although he grew up in the city in the 1930s and 1940s, was an avid baseball fan, read the newspaper regularly, and was an outspoken opponent of segregation, he was not aware that a renowned negro league team played in the city. Reports of the teams were recorded daily in the newspaper but the structure of life and the impact of segregation was such that the team was invisible to the non-black population. Statements of this kind, which evoke a radically different time and mindset and are so often absent from the formal historical record, can be captured through careful research and documentation of intangible heritage.

Our institutional commitment to recording intangible culture increased after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The proximity of northern, and even central, New Jersey to New York City meant that it was impossible for the state to emerge from the disaster unscathed – in fact, approximately one-fourth of those who lost their lives when the World Trade Center towers collapsed were New Jersey residents. Within days of the catastrophe, we opened our repository to donations of objects and documents that, in the future, could be used to explore the impact of the September 11th events upon New Jersey and New Jerseyans.

We collected many tangible objects – makeshift posters created by families and friends searching for their loved ones, photographs from memorials that were created spontaneously in commuter train stations as well as in places with views of lower Manhattan, paintings and other works of art commemorating the attacks. But it will be the many stories that we collected and the oral history interviews that we recorded shortly after the events themselves that will provide the richest pool of materials for interpretation by historians in the future.

The oral history collection records the stories of ordinary New Jerseyans, including volunteers who worked at a centre that assisted families of victims from New Jersey, volunteer recovery workers, employees



Figure 5-1: A photograph of a group of the first responders from New Jersey, volunteers who answered the call for help at the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11th.

**Figure 5-2:** A photograph of "the pile" as the debris at the World Trade Center site was called by the rescue workers as well as a hard hat and boots given to the Historical Society's historian during the oral history interview she did with one of the workers.



working in the vast organization of the Port of New York and New Jersey and air traffic controllers, as well as members of several ethnic groups (especially Arab and Arab-Americans), and immigration attorneys.

The interviews will go a long way toward answering some of the questions about what happened on September 11th after the towers collapsed, but they also do much more than that. They record a depth of experience, beliefs, and narratives usually absent from historical documentation, do not fit conventional historical interpretations, and will unquestionably have an impact upon how historians recount and interpret the impact of the events in the distant future.

We began the practice of collecting intangible culture as a way of making our exhibitions, collections and institution relevant to our contemporary, urban audiences. Now, ten years later, as we ask what impact this has had, we can see that in adopting this practice we have also made a number of subsequent decisions that have changed our institution – its collections and collections policies, its staffing needs and staff and its users.

First and foremost, the practice of recording intangible culture has been an integral part of the process of broadening and diversifying our audiences and has helped us make the Historical Society more responsive to our communities' needs. For example, as

we began to publicise our collecting activities after September 11th, we became aware that amassing this archive of material would not only be important to the Historical Society and historians of the future, but also was already of great significance to those present-day New Jerseyans today who gave us their objects and recounted their stories. And we realized that we had a responsibility to present this material to the public sooner rather than later. Thus, in spite of curatorial qualms, we mounted an exhibition of these materials on the first anniversary of September 11th.

Understanding that the events were too recent for us to understand and interpret historically, we chose to employ the perspectives of the people who had participated in our project as a framework for the exhibition. Drawing largely upon the intangible culture that we collected, we thus constructed an exhibition that drew few conclusions and asked simply for visitors to remember and reflect, and, if they chose, contribute their thoughts.

In addition to creating stronger ties to our constituents, the process of collecting stories, songs, traditions, and lore has brought to the Historical Society an archive of material that is different from what we had collected in the past. The differences are, first of all, physical. Most of the accounts were recorded on audiotape or, more recently, are digitally recorded, and

they have different preservation needs from the material objects in our collections. We have made a commitment to maintaining and preserving the original records as well as, whenever possible, to creating transcripts and indexes of the materials so that the public can access them in different ways. And we have also had to think carefully about how to make these materials accessible to all who wish to use them.

The collecting projects themselves have required not only the skills of a curator of history/material culture but also the skills of folklorists, ethnographers, and oral historians; therefore, the range of skills that we need to carry on our work has expanded. This is reflected both in the qualifications we look for in staff we hire, and in the scholarly disciplines from which we draw consultants to advise us on the development of our exhibitions.

But most significantly, we have hours of audio recordings that provide a glimpse into the lives and customs of contemporary New Jerseyans – the things they remember and deem important. Some of these narratives relate to objects now in our collections, but most are items in and of themselves – stories of life in the state as well as the customs, traditions, slang, dances, and songs. The archive speaks to different cultural and ethnic groups, for New Jersey is close to many major points of entry to the United States for immigrants and often ends up being their home. Thus, the material we have collected can be used as a resource to understand cultural change and assimilation, documenting the modifications and adaptations that people make in their traditional practices as they move from one place to another. It can also be used to build bridges between cultural groups, helping people understand their differences and discover what they hold in common.

The archive also reveals the distinct cultural and social forms that have developed in the region. This is important to us, as the major historical repository for the state of New Jersey, for it can help provide an understanding of how the state fits into the larger American whole, or more grandly, how a local place defines itself within the context of global mass-production. Sandwiched between the large metropolitan areas of New York and Philadelphia, New Jersey, to many Americans, is no more than the butt of jokes on late-night TV or endless miles of boring highway. Yet through an examination of New Jersey's intangible heritage, one can begin to discover its distinctness. Whether we are looking at the tradition of ending the celebration of a high school senior prom 'down the shore' [at the beach], or of creating memorials at train stations – key places for commuters who work in New York City and for those who lost their lives on September 11th – or at the lives of people who spent Sunday afternoons driving the New Jersey Turnpike or enjoyed dancing Joey Dee's version of the twist, intangible culture reveals how New Jersey differs from other places – what elements of contemporary culture give us a distinct sense of place not only within the United States but also on the globe. Thus a technique for linking the present to the past to bring history to life and to relate it to diverse contemporary audiences has yielded a significant collection for the future. While objects remain our primary collections and the power and information that they carry will unquestionably remain important to future generations, it is increasingly evident that documenting intangible heritage is key to presenting local stories in an increasingly mass-produced, global world. 🇺🇸