

REPORT ON A MUSEUM INTERNSHIP

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ALISON ROTH

"Exhibit on James Montgomery Bailey and 19th Century Danbury and Women and Work in the 19th Century. Scott-Fanton Museum, Tuesday, through Sunday, 2-5"

This notice ran in the Danbury News-Times, May, 1975 for three and one-half weeks. It held a special significance for me since the Bailey exhibit was the result of my semester's work under a program pioneered by the Western Connecticut State College History Department in museum internship. The program, also sponsored by the Scott-Fanton Museum, was worth six undergraduate credits. I was one of two museum interns, Lorraine Ostergren was the other. The job of a museum intern was to research and prepare an exhibit on a specific topic. Dr. Herbert Janick and Dr. Truman Warner were our history department advisors.

Choosing a topic was difficult. I had to pick something which would keep me busy researching during the semester and at the end yield the raw materials needed for an exhibit. Mrs. Dorothy Schling the museum's curator, worked very closely with me. She suggested a few topics such as researching silverware patterns, studying the history of Danbury Hospital, and the one I chose: indexing James Montgomery Bailey's History of Danbury.

While indexing the History I hoped to glean facts which I could use for an exhibit. It did not exactly turn out that way. A few interesting stories appeared here and there such as a morbid description of two hangings which occurred in the early 18th century in Danbury, a short biography of Enoch Crosby of Danbury who was the model for James Fenimore Cooper's Spy stories, but I did not find much on which I could base an exhibit. More was needed. It was that point that I decided to focus on Bailey himself and his experience to find out what life was like in 19th century Danbury.

Bailey was a prestigious figure of 19th century Danbury. He was a Civil War hero, author of at least four best-sellers, and a humorist compared in his own day to the likes of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. He was also publisher of the Danbury News-Times, which he established during the 1870's and which became world renowned under his direction. It was during these years (1870's-1893) that he became called the "Danbury News-Man".

I began gathering materials on Bailey and Danbury. Through connections at the museum, I borrowed books and letters he had written, plates of pictures used in his History of Danbury, and a chair Bailey had owned. Stephen Collins, Editorial Page Editor at The News-Times, lent me a scrap book he had secured years before from the trash can, put together by Bailey himself, containing a short autobiographical

description. Mrs. Schling made available the many pictures the museum held of late 19th century Danbury and some old copies of the Danbury paper. My aunt loaned me some penny postcards picturing Danbury during the 19th century.

Now the problem came of how to put it all together. Lorraine Ostergren, the other museum intern, and I decided to see other museums and exhibits to get an idea. We took three field trips. The first was to Cooperstown, New York where we looked at the James Fenimore Cooper house, and saw how to use photographs in an exhibit. The second trip was to Mystic, Connecticut where we looked at a number of maritime exhibits, and museum officials explained restoration processes of museum artifacts to us. The last trip was to Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. We found it interesting in its replication of a New England town, though it dealt with an earlier period than we had in mind.

With the culmination of this work, and with the encouragement and support of Mrs. Schling, Dr. Janick and Dr. Warner, I was able to put together a successful exhibit. The museum internship gave me an appreciation for museum work I had never had before. It allowed me to use some of the basic history skills I had acquired after four years at Wesconn, since it required the use of primary sources and a knowledge of how to research. It also left open to me the real possibility of continuing in museum work at some future date.*

*For information regarding museum work as a profession, see CLIO Volume 2, #4: "Help Wanted: History Majors to Display Talents in Museum Work" by Dr. Truman A. Warner.