

Changing the Story
Laura B. Roberts, Roberts Consulting

Lucy Rogers burst into the kitchen of the Amos Smith House (ASH) Monday morning so excited she was shaking. “Tom,” she said to the executive director, who was pouring a cup of coffee, “can we talk NOW. I have something so amazing to tell you.”

Tom Ferguson looked at the House’s education director with amusement. “Sure Lucy, get some coffee and follow me. I have some checks and stuff to sign, but we can talk while I work. Otherwise, I won’t have time until late this afternoon.”

“Oh no, this can’t wait that long,” she said, skipping the coffee and following him out of the room.

Lucy had been at ASH for about three years. She had joined the staff right out of one of the top museum studies programs. Before graduate school, she had worked as an educator for five years at two other historic sites. Before that, as a college student, she had worked summers as a seasonal interpreter and had completed an internship at a genealogical research library. A year ago she began a second graduate degree in American Studies at the State University in Springfield. At 32, she was ASH’s youngest department head but had proven herself repeatedly over the years as an intelligent historian and educator, an approachable manager, a creative programmer and an excellent ambassador in Springfield, serving on the state History Day steering committee and the Springfield YWCA board of directors. Program attendance and school visitation were both up and the local newspaper had named ASH a “hidden treasure” in the city for its weekend family programs.

As she sat down in Tom’s office (and he started signing a thick pile of checks and purchase orders), she told him her news. She had spent Saturday at the annual meeting of the state American Studies Association. The keynote speaker was Fred Humphries, who had just completed an NEH-funded research effort for a consortium of historical agencies in the state, coordinated by the state historical society. Fred’s project was to uncover whatever he could about the African American history of the state as documented by the collections of the museums, libraries and historical societies in the consortium. His research had been ground-breaking. But what really excited Lucy were two things. The first was confirmation of the often-whispered rumor that Amos Smith had owned five slaves during the time his family lived at the House. But the second item was new to Lucy. In the mid 19th century, the owners of the house were the Phillips family, who were always described as “reformers.” But not much more was known about them. Richard Phillips taught school for a while, was publisher of the local newspaper and was a deacon of the church. Less was known about his wife, Henrietta Phillips. But Fred Humphries had uncovered much more.

“Henrietta Phillips was an abolitionist!” Lucy declared. “She spoke all over the region. She entertained the leading abolitionists of the day here at the house, black and white. And after the war, she became an advocate for the rights of women. She was in touch with all the suffragists here and in England. We didn’t know much about her because she was known by her birth name, Henrietta Young. She was a real firebrand.”

Tom put down his pen. This was indeed great news. When he was honest with himself, he admitted that the Amos Smith story was boring – the well worn story of a wealthy colonial merchant in a small coastal city who built a grand brick house. The collection was largely “of the period,” with no Smith family provenance. Before Lucy joined the staff, they had worked with a consultant on an

interpretive plan for the House. Despite everyone's good efforts, they never found a "hook" that would make the house relevant to the lives of their visitors. But this would be a story that visitors, particularly Springfield's large African American community, would find compelling. Maybe he would no longer have to beg African Americans to join the board, only to see them leave after their first term was up.

"Lucy, you're right. This is great. I want you to do more work on this and figure out how we can tell the story in the House. But let's keep this quiet for now. We don't want to get anyone upset. And it will be even more effective when we can surprise everyone with the new plans. Good work!"

Over the next six months, Lucy worked hard on a plan to reinterpret the House. Fred Humphries shared photocopies of his documentation of the five enslaved Africans and she developed biographies of them and their roles in the household. Humphries wrote a short background paper on the slave community of Springfield. She looked at the historic structures report and discovered that the woodwork and wallpaper of the southeast upstairs chamber, used as a store room, were from 1855, the right time frame for telling Henrietta's story. She found furniture from the period in the collections, including a writing desk. Knowing she was looking for Henrietta *Young*, she found newspaper articles about her speeches. Eventually she discovered a cache of her letters in the archive of a nearby women's college. She talked to education directors at other houses and sites including the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls (Henrietta had been at the first Women's Rights Convention). She wrote a new tour of the house, including a reinstalled southeast chamber where Henrietta's story would be told and revised the orientation slide show to include both the Smith's enslaved household staff and Henrietta Young. She reviewed the state history curriculum frameworks and drafted the outline of a new tour for sixth grades when they were studying reform and dissent in American history. Through it all, she updated Tom regularly, writing monthly progress reports and sharing highlights at their weekly meetings.

One Monday morning in early October, with her research and work completed, she arrived in Tom's office for a scheduled meeting. She had an outline of her work and her plan for rolling out the new story. She wanted to reinstall "Henrietta's room," as she now thought of it, right after school tours ended mid-November, to be ready in time for the annual holiday open house. The new tours would begin when the house reopened for the season in late March. The new school program would be in the spring mailing to teachers. Training for all of this would take place during the winter, when ASH always did interpreter and school program training. She wasn't sure when would be the right time to issue the press releases, but thought that the week after Thanksgiving, when little else was happening in town, might work. True to her instructions, she had not talked with the curator or marketing director. Her educational advisory committee was also unaware of her work. Only the social studies coordinator in the Springfield schools, Fred Humphries, and a few colleagues at other sites knew of her research, which she told them was for her master's thesis.

Tom was even more enthusiastic than he had been six months ago. "We're going to knock their socks off!" he declared. "Let's tell everyone at tomorrow's staff meeting."

Monthly staff meetings, held the first Tuesday of the month, were generally dull affairs, with reports by each of the department heads and a review of the month ahead. Tom began by calling on Lucy. "I'll let Lucy go first today because she's been a busy lady the last six months. I think we'll all be thrilled by what she has to tell us! I know I am."

Lucy gave her report, much as she had the day before in Tom's office. It was a longer than the 15 minutes usually allocated to department heads, so she rushed a bit. As she finished, the reactions ranged from excitement to wonder to anger. The curator, Sally Adler, who had been at the House longer than anyone else on the staff, spoke first. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of this? Don't we work as *a team* here? Isn't that what you've been preaching since you got here, Tom? Where am I supposed to put the collections that are in the southeast chamber? And I'm not sure all the period pieces you've found for that room are in good enough shape to be exhibited. The upholstery is torn on that chair, and we certainly don't have the money for conservation. If you'd consulted me, I could have told you that."

Lucy turned to Tom for back up. He looked over the room and said, "Ed, what do you think?" calling on the marketing director, who was smiling and nodding throughout Lucy's report. "I think it's great. We'll get terrific press. I'm sure this is a story I can sell. I think Lucy's done a great job and we can all make it happen." He looked around the room, avoiding Sally's angry gaze. "But I'm not sure we can do it on this timetable, Lucy. We don't have money to reprint the school brochure for the spring; remember we did a double order this summer intending to just mail out the same piece again after the first of the year. And I've already lined up all of the garden clubs for the Christmas, sorry, *holiday* house tour – we can't add another room at this point, there just aren't enough volunteers. And a mid 19th century room wouldn't go with our theme, anyway. Let's do it right and launch next fall, so we're not so rushed and we can budget for it."

The registrar, Amanda Lewis, smiled for the first time. "I agree, let's wait. I had scheduled a vacation for the last two weeks of November; I can't be here to help shift all the collections. But if I have to, I'll change it. I was a women's studies major in college and this is the coolest project I can imagine. I don't want to miss anything!"

Over the next hour, a new timetable was developed by the excited staff. The story of the enslaved Africans would be incorporated into the tour as soon as possible, with a special interpreter training session held in the next two weeks. The slide show would be revised; one of the interpreters had connections with the college radio station where they could record a new narration. The southeast chamber would be installed over the summer and opened in the fall, when the tour would be changed to include more about Henrietta Young. In the meantime, Lucy and her staff would pilot and evaluate the new school tour program in the spring so it would be ready for next fall. Joan, the director of development, would make up a list of potential foundations and individual donors as soon as the proposal she was working on was completed.

On the way out of the meeting, Amanda pulled Lucy to the side and said, "I am really excited about this. Don't let Sally get in your way. You need anything from collections, just come to me." In the meantime, Tom said to Sally, in a teasing voice loud enough for everyone who was still in the room to hear, "Come on, Sally, you have to admit this is great. Get on board or you'll be left behind."

Over the next few months, things moved quickly and pretty well according to the schedule outlined at the staff meeting. Young family descendents donated funds to conserve furniture for Henrietta's room and found some additional items, including her Bible, a quilt and personal letters. There were frequent updates in the membership newsletter and the local press, including photographs of Henrietta's great great great niece and the quilt. A group of sixth grade teachers, working with a professor from the state university, developed a solid curriculum on dissent and reform, and the state humanities council funded a summer institute for a wider circle of teachers, which ASH co-

sponsored with the African American Historical Society. The staff noticed more African American visitors and youth groups that first spring. In the fall, after Henrietta's room was opened, tour bookings from church groups and women's clubs increased. Tom and Lucy co-authored an article for *History News* and Tom participated in a panel on "Reinterpretation and Change: The Management Challenges" at the AASLH annual meeting. Lucy was invited to speak to the state museum association's annual meeting. The nominating committee had no problem recruiting two excellent African American board members. Three people of color joined the staff of interpreters. Lucy began writing her master's thesis on Henrietta Young.

But through all the excitement, Lucy noticed small problems. Walking through the house one day, she heard an interpreter mention the "slaves... I'm sorry, we're supposed to say 'enslaved African Americans'... no, that can't be right, we weren't America yet... I don't know what's politically correct." She wrote a careful memo on how to talk respectfully about these five members of the household and sent it off to all the interpreters. Another day she heard one say, "Yes, Richard Phillips was very open minded to allow Henrietta to go all over the country speaking. After all, she left him at home as a house husband!" One more memo on gender roles and expectations in 1855, the composition of the household staff during the Phillips' occupancy and Richard's career.

Then one day she was posting a tour for one of her graduate seminars in the calendar and noticed three or four reservations with the notation "OT." She hoped they hadn't become so busy that they were paying interpreters overtime, so she asked John, the tour coordinator, about it. "Oh, that means they want the old tour. Fortunately, some of the interpreters still like that better – sort of like my grandmother preferring the Latin mass, I guess – so we can do it."

Lucy was livid. "Who are they? And why are you giving in on this? There's no 'old' tour or 'new' tour, there's a tour!"

John was surprised. "Everyone is always saying we need to be more customer-oriented, meet their needs. Isn't this just being responsive? After all, the old tour was fine for years. Thousands of people took it and had a great experience. I don't see the problem."

"We don't have two tours, John. We have *one tour*, with the story of the enslaved Africans and Henrietta. That's it. Don't book any more 'old' tours." With that, Lucy left and went straight to her office, where stewed until the managers meeting at 3 p.m.

A few hours later she had calmed down enough that she presented it to Tom and her colleagues as an ironic glitch that she had corrected. "Can you imagine?" she asked them. "But don't worry, I have it under control."

"Actually," said Ed, the marketing director, "I think it's probably a good thing. We should give people the product they want. John's just being customer focused."

"Ed's right," said Sally, "if the new tour makes them uncomfortable, they won't have a good time. And we want people to enjoy visiting the house. If it's unpleasant, they won't come back or tell their friends. Anyway, you always tell us that visitors only remember three or four things from the tour. Maybe we've made it too complicated. The old tour was more straightforward; people weren't so confused."

Lucy was almost speechless. But she recovered her wits enough to say, "Visitation is up. Membership is up. People aren't confused, they're excited and engaged!"

Joan agreed. "We've raised more money for this project than I could have every anticipated, from donors and foundations who have never given to us before. And annual giving is up 40% over last year. You've made my job so much easier, Lucy, thank you," she said, bowing to her colleague.

Tom put up his hands. "It's not our job to sanitize the past. We study history because it helps us understand ourselves and how we live together and that's not always pretty. The new tour is THE tour, period."

On the way out, Ed stopped Lucy and said, "We have a garden club lined up to do Henrietta's room for the holiday open house. They're excited, because we finally have a room where we can have a Christmas tree. She would have had a tree, right?"

"Maybe a small one," said Lucy. "I'm sure I have some sources." Back in her office, she found photocopies of two letters that talked about the holidays, quiet days spent in church, exchanging small presents with her husband, and visiting with her sister's family. Ed thanked her and sent the letters off to the garden club.

Weeks passed and the furor over the "old" tour seemed to die down. Lucy was too busy to observe any tours but John said he had "solved the problem." In fact, she didn't get back into the front of the house until early December when she went to see the holiday decorations the day before the open house. In Henrietta's room there was a seven-foot tree, completely covered with elaborate ornaments. A collection of two dozen toys spilled out from under the tree and halfway into the room. Ed came up behind her. "Isn't it great?" he said. "I'm so glad we have this room where we can exhibit 19th century things. The promotional photographs came out great."

"Ed! The Phillips' were childless," said Lucy. "And Christmas was a quiet, religious day. This is something out of Martha Stewart."

"Ease up, Lucy. It's just a tree," said Ed. "Her brother's house probably looked like this with all those kids."

Lucy just shook her head, knowing the battle was lost for this year. She would fight next year if she were still at ASH. She had been approached by the director of the state historical society to apply for the job of director of education. It was a much bigger job, with a big increase in salary. With the first draft of her thesis almost done, the timing was perfect. Her interview was scheduled for early January.

The interview went well and she went back for a second interview with the other department heads. As she left, the director admitted to her that they had to put the process on hold until the chair of the education committee returned from Florida, "when the snow melts." Lucy tried not to think about it and concentrate on her work and her thesis.

In early February, Tom called her into his office the morning after the regular board meeting. "I have two things to discuss with you, Lucy. You know, the board met last night. It was wild. I had

asked them to consider changing the name of the house. The story is much bigger than Amos Smith now. Jane Townsend said it was patriarchal to use ‘Amos’ in our name; there were many family members here. She favored the ‘Smith Young House.’ But no one else liked that. We figured Henrietta used Phillips at home... just like my wife. The paper boy calls her Mrs. Ferguson, not Ms. Ives, even though that’s not her name. Then Steve Cohen said that this was an Italian and Jewish neighborhood in the early 20th century. He found an old photograph which showed the house with a candy store on the ground floor and the name ‘Spinelli’s’ on the awning. He suggested we do the research and include that story in our interpretation, which is a great idea. Maybe it should be the ‘Smith Phillips Spinelli House!’ Or the ‘Springfield History Center.’ Anyway, we tabled the whole discussion until we can give the marketing committee a chance to think about our ‘brand.’ We’ll resolve it when we finish the strategic plan next year. Meantime, see what you can find out about who lived here after Henrietta.” Lucy took the photograph from his outstretched hand.

“The second item was about the capital campaign. Joe Foster, who’s doing the feasibility study, had a meeting with some of the Smith family descendents. They’re really upset that we started talking about the slaves without checking with them first. They don’t think Amos should be called a slave *owner*. He inherited the slaves from his first wife, who inherited them from her father. It’s not like he bought them. Anyway, is that interpreter with the friend at the radio station still with us? We need a new narration for the slide show. We’re counting on them for a lead gift for the campaign, and we just can’t compromise that.” Lucy didn’t even try to argue. She left Tom’s office promising to make changes to the slide show script and do some research on the house.

On March 15, after lunch with the chair of the education committee, Lucy was offered and accepted the job at the state historical society. She left the photo with her notes on the house’s occupants and a draft script in Tom’s in box on her last day of work. The new director of education – a social studies teacher from the local schools who had worked on the sixth grade curriculum and served on the board of the African American Historical Society – would start at the end of the school year. “It’s his problem now,” she thought.