

Careers for Historians: Living History Interpreters

By Beth Crist

If time travel were possible, you could go back to earlier periods and experience what life was like. You could watch as people went about their daily work, see how they dressed, and find out what they believed and enjoyed. But until someone invents a time machine, being a living history interpreter offers the next best method of time travel. Living history interpreters give us a glimpse into times past.

Most living history interpreters work at sites that re-create particular places and time periods. Living history sites include museums, historic houses, farms, villages, factories, and battlefields. Visitors leave the present behind when they enter these sites. They see houses with period furnishings, people in reproduction clothing, and horse-drawn farm equipment.

Some living history interpreters demonstrate traditional trades such as blacksmithing and shoe making. Others act as tour guides, explaining to visitors what life was like in the past. Still others simulate daily routines—working, shopping, sewing and doing laundry by hand, cooking, farming, chatting with fellow townspeople (other living history interpreters), and going to school. Interpreters also act in historical plays and take part in reenactments of events such as wartime battles.

No matter what roles living history interpreters play, they must first research the time period to learn what everyday life was like. To portray famous historical figures like Thomas Jefferson or people known through historical records, interpreters gather facts from biographies, letters, diaries, and other sources. This information helps them develop realistic characters.

Some living history interpreters have bachelor's or master's degrees in history, while others have degrees in education, acting, archaeology, museum studies, anthropology, or other fields. Many living history jobs, however, don't require college degrees. People proficient in trades such as tinsmithing often work as interpreters. Entry-level positions sometimes require only a strong interest in history and the ability to conduct research. With a growing number of historic sites and museums across the country employing living history interpreters, the job outlook is promising. Although many positions are seasonal or part-time, lovers of history will find these jobs fascinating and rewarding.

To learn more:

- Visit the following Web sites:

America's Outdoor History Museums

<http://www.outdoorhistory.org/>

The Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums: Living History Help

<http://www.alhfam.org/alhfam.help.html>

- Arrange a behind-the-scenes tour with a living history interpreter. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be an interpreter? What is your educational background? What is the most challenging part of your job?
- Visit a living history site near you. North Carolina sites include

Duke Homestead in Durham

<http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/hs/duke/duke.htm>

High Point Museum and Historical Park in High Point

<http://www.highpointmuseum.org/>

Historic Latta Plantation in Huntersville

<http://www.lattaplantation.org/>

Mountain Farm Museum in Cherokee

<http://www.nps.gov/grsm/gsmsite/history.html>

Old Salem in Winston-Salem

<http://www.oldsalem.org/index.htm>

Roanoke Island Festival Park in Manteo

<http://www.roanokeisland.com/>

Tannenbaum Historic Park in Greensboro

<http://www.greensboro-nc.gov/Departments/Parks/facilities/tannenbaum/>

Tryon Palace in New Bern

<http://www.tryonpalace.org/>

Other museums and historic sites around the state offer occasional or seasonal living history programs.

Try it out:

- Volunteer as an interpreter at a living history site or at a special event. Students can show visitors what daily life was like for children in a certain time and place. Some of your duties as a volunteer may include attending class in a one-room schoolhouse, playing games with other students, or performing chores the old-fashioned way.
- Ask your parents, a relative, or your teacher to lead you through the activities at <http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/history/livinghistory.html> and <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/History/Story.html>.

Interview with Sarah Chapman

Sarah Chapman is director of interpretive programs at Old Salem, a living history town in Winston-Salem on the original site of Salem, a Moravian community founded in 1766. Chapman began working at Old Salem in 1995. As a historic trades interpreter in the Tailor's Shop and Shoemaker's Shop, she made men's clothing and leather goods while explaining the trade and history of Salem to visitors.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Sarah Chapman: I have a bachelor of arts degree in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with a minor in art history. While in college, I took advantage of courses relating to the museum field as often as possible, including a summer archaeology field school, a museum education course at Ackland Art Museum, and an internship for credit.

BC: When did you become interested in living history interpretation?

SC: I always knew that I wanted to be involved in museum work. I had a passion for history but did not want to become a teacher. I wasn't quite sure, however, which aspect of the museum field I would enjoy the most, so I tried different areas. I worked summers at Old Salem while I was in college, along with other museum jobs during the year. As I compared the work in each place, I learned that I enjoyed the interaction with the public that living history offered. I also liked the creativity allowed to develop new programs and approach teaching history from new angles.

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

SC: Yes. While in college, I worked as a tour guide at Duke Homestead State Historic Site in Durham and served an internship at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh as a curatorial assistant.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

SC: As director of interpretive programs, I work each day overseeing the programs and interpretations we currently offer our visitors. I conduct research and formulate new programs. I also work to develop special event days at Old Salem. On days when I am able to work in costume or interpret in a building, I work in one location in town, usually demonstrating an activity, and interpret that work and its significance to our visitors. I always enjoy being able to interact with the public; it keeps me in touch with the types of programs our visitors desire.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

SC: The thing I like best about my job is hard to say; there are many aspects that I enjoy. The most rewarding aspect is when I am working with the public, especially children, and something I say or something they see in the recreated environment clicks, and they see or experience something in a new way and they “get it.”

BC: Do you portray a specific character at Old Salem?

SC: At Old Salem we do not portray specific characters but talk about the site and people from a twenty-first-century perspective looking back. In the Tailor’s Shop we cut and sew eighteenth-century clothing completely by hand for some of the male interpreters on our staff. A tailor was an expert at cutting the pattern for a garment so that it would flatter a man’s shape and posture. As I work in the Tailor’s Shop doing one of these tasks, I describe to the visitor why they might visit a tailor in the eighteenth century and compare it to buying clothes in the twenty-first century, along with offering an explanation of what I am doing at that moment, and the trade of the tailor.

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming living history interpreters?

SC: The best advice I can give someone interested in a career in living history is to do something that they love. Living history is a field in which you become deeply involved, and it is a commitment. An educational background in history is always helpful, and if you have the opportunity to gain some experience in the field while you are in school, it will definitely help you get a job when the time comes.