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JUSTICE, PANDEMICS, AND MUSEUMS IN CYBERSPACE:
ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUMS' DECOLONIZATION PROJECTS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

By

SAMUEL J BESSE

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
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APPROVAL

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
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ABSTRACT

Justice, Pandemics, and Museums in Cyberspace:
Archaeology Museums' Decolonization Projects During the Covid-19 Pandemic

By

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This paper explores three Archeology Museums (Historic St. Mary's City, James Madison's Montpelier, and the American Museum of Natural History), their attempts at addressing the colonial narratives that museums are built on, and how the Covid-19 pandemic and protests over George Floyd's death affected these projects. I place a special effort on the online presence of these museums, as this is the main way visitors interacted with the museums during the pandemic. After discussing the origins of museum's decolonization efforts and their efforts to make an online presence, I talk about the Covid-19 pandemic and the events around George Floyd's death. Then, I take a deep dive into the three museums, their decolonization projects, their online presence, and how they responded to the protests. Finally, I discuss what happened to these museums and their projects once the pandemic and the protests were over. I argue that these museums' projects did not come into fruition due to the institutions' desire to change themselves, but rather due to the efforts of individuals inside these institutions collaborating with outside communities to make the changes themselves.

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To my grandmother and grandfather: Ann Dolores and Edward Walter Koshnick

Introduction:

During the Covid-19 pandemic when many museums were forced to close for public health concerns, they embraced many methods to decolonize museums. These methods include digitalizing their collections and exhibits to allow more people to learn from the museum from afar and for free, as well as ways to decolonize the museum's narratives themselves by emphasizing more diverse points of view. Much of this narrative change were prompted by events outside the museum world, namely the George Floyd murder protests in 2020, and were done by the museums in response to what was going on in the United States. This was especially the case since many people were interested in change. But as the lockdowns ended and the protests subsided, this apparent change shifted back. Many museums began to discontinue this trend towards decolonization or even walk back some of their decisions. Taking a close examination of the changing policies and practices of three museums with colonial roots—The American Museum of Natural History in New York City, James Madison's Montpelier in Orange, VA, and Historic St. Mary's City in St Mary's City, MD, —this paper argues that, rather than representing a 'sea change' among such museums, efforts to decolonize were more an attempt to stay relevant in uncertain times when people were unable or unwilling to visit their physical exhibits. The changes that did remain ultimately were the result of individuals in the museum working to convince their museums to keep the changes, rather than the institution itself leading the efforts, highlighting that any structural change requires slow and steady pressure by individuals and communities.

The process that led to these museums moving to decolonize to adjust with the times and then start to go back on them is complex, and so this thesis will have multiple parts in attempt to explain them. Firstly, it will talk about the decolonization methods before the Covid-19

pandemic. These include both ways that decolonization happened, the methods used, and how museums successfully or unsuccessfully adopted them. Next, is the history of museums in the United States in general, with a special focus on the business side of the museums. Museums in the United States, while being officially non-profit institutions, are responsible for acquiring their own resources and use many of the same techniques as for-profit companies to get them, and this dual nature of education and commercialism affects museums' decisions.

After talking about museums in specific, the paper will then talk about the Covid-19 Pandemic and the two crises of 2020. The first crisis is the pandemic itself, with all the challenges that befell museums during that time. It will go into how museums responded to the pandemic, particularly their financial situation and how museums struggled to keep themselves operating when their main forms of revenue dried up during the pandemic. The museums tried a plethora of diverse ways to stay solvent, from expanding their online presence to starting to focus more on their decolonization projects. One reason museums chose this last method was partly due to the second crisis: the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020.

After George Floyd's death on May 25th, 2020, and after the mass protests that followed, museums, like many other institutions, responded to these protests. While most museums wrote some official press releases condemning Floyd's murder and the systemic violence against people of color, some museums went farther and started to make some changes with how they presented their efforts to decolonize themselves. Many of these methods were just increasing the scope and urgency of their decolonization projects. New projects were started, existing ones went from a subject of intellectual curiosity to something more urgent, and timetables all around were adjusted. Still, some museums went even further, with institutional changes. These changes lasted through the lockdowns, and into when the museums started to reopen for public viewing.

In my paper, I look at three of these museums' decolonization projects: the American Museum of Natural History, Historic St. Mary's City, and James Madison's Montpelier. For the AMNH, the project I looked at was the exhibit "Addressing the Statue," which was an exhibit explaining the controversy around the Statue of Theodore Roosevelt that used to be outside the museum. In Historic St. Mary's City's case, I looked at their "People to People" project, which is their proposed plan to explore the early days of the Maryland colony with an Indigenous American lens. Finally, for James Madison's Montpelier, I examined their work with the descendants of the Enslaved people that President Madison kept on the site, including the museum's decision to enact structural change and create a board equal to their board of directors made of some of these members.

Nevertheless, as the lockdowns ended and museums started opening back up for visitors, this focus on decolonization projects started to revert to pre-pandemic priorities. The AMNH, for instance, after finally deciding to remove the statue of Roosevelt, also dismantled the exhibit about it, and has yet to replace it with another exhibit that talks about the museum's colonial legacy. Additionally, Historic St. Mary's City's project, the "People to People" project has had no updates since 2021, and it is unclear whether the project is continuing behind the scenes or has been quietly canceled. However, possibly the most dramatic reversion has been at James Madison's Montpelier, where the newly created secondary board of directors was dissolved and many of the people involved in its creation were fired. While public outcry eventually resulted in the board being reinstated and the fired employees re-hired, the event was a reminder that the decolonization efforts brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic were being rolled back and only the efforts of the public would keep them going.

Decolonization before the Covid-19 Pandemic:

To begin the effort of decolonizing, museums first had to address their colonial legacies. Ever since modern museums were first created in the nineteenth century, museums have been a colonial institution, taking and categorizing items from the people they claim to be studying without their permission in ways that is not only culturally insensitive but also continues the colonial mission of imperialism and the perceived superiority of the colonizers. Many of the objects studied in museums were taken forcibly by colonizers, to show off their power over those they took over rather than a legitimate study of other cultures.¹ When indigenous people are talked about, frequently key details about who colonizers interacted with them are left out, with objects taken out of context and any historical details that don't fit with that particular museum's narrative left out.² Often times, this colonial message was constructed as if the indigenous peoples were no longer here, showing off that their genocidal colonial project was seemingly complete.³ This mindset is imbedded in museums as a whole, and its effects affect every facet of the museum as an institution.

Still, how does someone decolonize a museum? To take a foundational element of an institution and do away with it while keeping the institution intact is a tall order. Despite these challenges, museums were starting to decolonize before the Pandemic. The main pillars of these were cooperation with indigenous people and creative use of new technologies to expand the message of decolonization.

One of the most significant ways museums are decolonizing is through their cooperation with indigenous people and descendants of enslaved Africans. In fact, for many of the other

¹ Kassim, "The Museum Will Not Be Decolonized. Media Diversified," 3–4.

² Sperlich and Brogden, "'Finding' Payepot's Moccasins: Disrupting Colonial Narratives of Place," 11.

³ NYC Stands with Standing Rock et al., "2nd Annual Anti-Columbus Day Tour: Decolonize This Museum," 7.

methods to successfully work a degree of cooperation is needed. This cooperation, however, is not just considering the wishes of indigenous people, instead these voices must be present from the beginning and be a driving force behind their creation.⁴

Additionally, it is important for decolonization efforts to stress that colonization is not just something that happened in the past but is a continuing experience. The legacies of colonization and slavery are still in effect today, and to deny it would help continue it.⁵ Finally, to make the largest change cooperation must be at an institutional level.

What is the goal, however, of this cooperation? One goal is to humanize indigenous people, showing them not as other but as humans. One popular way to accomplish this is to use video or audio to tell stories about indigenous and formally enslaved people, with the testimonials being researched by historians and then performed by actors. The idea behind these testimonials is that they put a human face and voice to previously dry academic history, allowing people viewing them to treat the events like their own memories and allowing them to emphasize with the past person. These testimonials are often not specific, farther allowing the viewer to insert themselves into the historical narrative. This historical experience is not limited to video and audio however, as physical reconstructions of spaces can have the same effect. From recreations of spaces like the hold of a Middle Passage ship at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool,⁶ to the recreation of the South Yard at James Madison's Montpelier,⁷ these spaces can allow the museum visitor to emotionally connect with the past, helping strengthen the decolonization efforts of museums.

⁴ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, 79–80.

⁵ Sperlich and Brogden, "'Finding' Payepot's Moccasins: Disrupting Colonial Narratives of Place," 9.

⁶ Arnold-de Simine, "The 'Moving' Image: Empathy and Projection in the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool," 25–33.

⁷ James Madison's Montpelier, "The Mere Distinction of Colour."

Audiovisual additions to museums, however, are not cutting-edge technology, as such techniques have been around since the early twentieth century. What technology is much more recent is the internet. One of the most recent technological changes that greatly affected museums was the internet. While people had gone to, enjoyed, and learned from the institutions before its creation, the internet dramatically changed how people learned in general and learned from museums in particular. Still, this change did come slowly. Museums, at least in the beginning, were slow to establish an online presence. There was this fear in the early days of the Internet (in 1990s and early 2000s) that the internet could make going to physical museums obsolete, as the thought was that websites could replace traveling to the physical sites. If a visitor could just see something online, why would they go to a museum? Turns out this is not the case, with museums suffering no issues with visitations based on their websites.⁸ With that knowledge, museums started to slowly expand their websites and other online presence.

What is the purpose of museum's websites? Despite the seemingly simplicity of this question, the answer is much more complex because there is no one answer. Museum websites, especially before the Covid-19 Pandemic, provided a wide range of functions for a wide range of visitors' needs. Most visitors to the website are just seeking information about the museum for research to plan a visit. This "general public" visitor is looking at the website to plan their in-person visit to the museum, either in the sense that they are seeing if the museum is worth visiting and, if it is, information about its operation. These visitors see the museum's website infrequently, and once they get the information about how to plan their visit they leave. To them,

⁸ Hoffman, "Online Exhibitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic," 210.

the museum's website is only important as a way to plan their in-person visit, and any learning about the museum's content will come when they arrive at the physical location.⁹

Even so, despite how most visitors view a museum's website as only a way to plan their in-person visit, it is not the only way visitors interact with a museum's website. Some visitors, who Walsh et al call the "non-professional" category, have similar desires to researchers and students when looking at a website: they want to learn. While they do also use the website like the "general audience" category to plan their in-person visit, they also use the website for the informational content online. This behavior can be research-focused, but many times it is "casual browsing" and can be remarkably like how people act while visiting the physical museum space. They want to get the information the museum has, but don't want to physically go right then, so they examine the website to get the information that they desire.¹⁰

This information about the museum's content, while very enjoyable for the casual viewer, does bring one of the fiercest debates among museums: the educational side of museums versus their financial obligations. This concern about financial obligations was a large reason museums didn't digitalize early on, as they were wrongly concerned that if they put their collections on the internet people would not want to come to the physical museum to pay for a ticket.¹¹

⁹ Walsh et al., "Characterizing Online Museum Users: A Study of the National Museums Liverpool Museum Website," 76–83.

¹⁰ Walsh et al., 77–84.

¹¹ Hoffman, "Online Exhibitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic," 210.

The Long Fight of Decolonization:

Even though the methods mentioned above are important tools to decolonialize, their mere existence did not automatically result in museums becoming immediately decolonized. The effort and desire to decolonize is not enough; how these methods are implemented matters too, to avoid common pitfalls with decolonization efforts. For technology, one of the largest challenges is that people need additional technology to experience digital media. To go to a museum requires simply finding one's way there. To use the internet, one needs a computer, a connection, and the knowledge to use it, which is something not everyone in the world has. Internet usage can vary between different demographics, with younger and more educated people having greater access and internet skills than older and less educated people.¹ It is safe to assume that, therefore, these demographics are the ones that benefit most with museums and their decolonization projects being online, with educators for these groups being included as well.²

Additionally, decolonization also affects both what artifacts are displayed, and the language used to describe them. For the artifacts, museums need to take great care to make sure that what is displayed is not only sensitive to those they are studying but also doesn't continue the colonial aspects of museums. In a physical exhibit, this is most common, as museums shouldn't display culturally sensitive objects like religious items in a display case. Even more importantly, museums should never, ever, display the actual remains of indigenous people or enslaved Africans, which is something that was done in the past.³ These rules still apply for

¹ van Deursen, "Digital Inequality During a Pandemic: Quantitative Study of Differences in COVID-19-Related Internet Uses and Outcomes Among the General Population," 7.

² Noehrer et al., "The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Data Practices in Museums and Art Galleries in the UK and the US.," 7.

³ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, 49–86.

digital exhibits, albeit replacing the actual artifact for a picture or video of it.⁴ With the colonial aspects out of the way (or at the very least minimized to the extent it can be), the exhibit's objects are participating with this decolonizing process.

What matters more in digital exhibits is the language that museums use to describe the artifacts or the media that make up the exhibit. This language is especially important as it provides context to the artifacts or media, explaining to the exhibit's viewer why these things on display are important and what they mean. Much of the old colonial narrative that museums have been built upon comes from this misuse of language, which often tells about colonial processes but fail to mention the Indigenous point of view. Even when they do mention indigenous points of view and how they suffered, there is no mention of why this is the case, and what the Colonists did to cause this.⁵

Just having an indigenous point of view, however, does not equal a decolonized narrative, as narratives that only mention indigenous suffering without mentioning their agency as humans is a product of colonialism. Many attempts at an indigenous point of view only talk about their suffering, without any mentioning of their rich cultural heritage other than being an unfortunate victim of colonization. While actions to resist colonization in the past had little long-term results, the fact that there were attempts to resist demonstrates that indigenous people had agency over their lives.

Another challenge to decolonization is the fact that American Museums are also a business. American Museums, like other cultural institutions, have been largely private organizations. While there are tiny amounts of federal funds for culture and the arts, most of the

⁴ Gish Hill and DeHass, "Digital Representation of Indigenous Peoples through Sharing, Collaboration, and Negotiation: An Introduction," 41.

⁵ Sperlich and Brogden, "'Finding' Payepot's Moccasins: Disrupting Colonial Narratives of Place," 8–11.

money for cultural institutions are local or private affairs that have no connection with the federal government⁶. These organizations are mostly classified as “non-profits,” and while some are funded by local governments⁷ most are not.⁸ What this means is that, ultimately, much of the money that supports cultural institutions like museums come from the people, either in the form of donations from wealthy benefactors or ticket sales.⁹ So, in order to make sure these smaller-scale institutions get the funding they need, they often turn to the free market for solutions.

This focus on American museums using the free market to affect their museum’s practices have a long history. In the early twentieth century, as the American museum was just starting to form, their creators decided that instead of using the most recent educational material available to them that they were going to build their museums using “persuasive salesmanship,” using “commercial techniques” to tell visitors about other cultures. Concerned that the current educational system would make science and learning too boring to capture the public’s imagination, these creators, almost exclusively wealthy men, wanted to re-create the museums to reach a broader audience, gathering people from all walks of life. To reach this goal of attracting more visitors, museums turned to consumer culture, with the goal of having museums as a chief entertainment competitor to leisure activities like theater, carnivals, and the newly created motion picture. The idea that incorporating commercialism in museums was immensely popular as many viewed it as a way to get more people into the museum’s doors and access to the educational content within. While many older museum professionals thought this was a bad idea

⁶ Katz and Reisman, “Impact of the 2020 Crises on the Arts and Culture in the United States: The Effect of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement in Historical Context,” 451.

⁷ Faden, “Historic St. Mary’s City Commission Fiscal Year 2023 Operating Budget Response to Department of Legislative Services Budget Analysis,” 1.

⁸ Katz and Reisman, “Impact of the 2020 Crises on the Arts and Culture in the United States: The Effect of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement in Historical Context,” 455.

⁹ Katz and Reisman, 455.

that might museum's educational mission,) museums largely incorporated these new consumerism-focused methods.

Many of these consumerist changes to museums involved an appeal to a visitor's emotions. The idea was that if the museums' exhibits caused the visitor to have an emotional response to the exhibit, that the visitor would become more emotionally invested in the exhibit and enjoy their time at the museum more. While they did claim that they were always making sure that it was in the interests of educational opportunity, the continuing focus "visual pleasure" and "emotional identification" for visitors caused the museums to turn to recent technologies. To do this, the museums added pictures, diagrams, and illustrations to their halls to support their collections and entice visitors. They also took some notes from art museums and department stores to create appealing lighting and colorings of the displays. These displays worked very well to bring in visitors, although what educational benefit they got from these changes was more mixed. Still, these museums kept these changes, as if visitors were flocking to the museums then surely they must have some educational merit, if only by the raw numbers of visitors.¹⁰ In addition to using more styles of running a museum, some museums started to take more blunt forays into commercialization, supplementing their admissions income with a new focus on their store. This included both expanding their on-site stores as well as making "off-site" stores to make money for the museum). However, these store increases only had a mixed success, and were not the large-money maker the institutions hoped for in the long-run.¹¹

¹⁰ Cain, "'Attraction, Attention, and Desire': Consumer Culture as Pedagogical Paradigm in Museums in the United States, 1900- 1930," 747-68.

¹¹ Toepler, "Caveat Venditor? Museum Merchandising, Nonprofit Commercialization, and the Case of the Metropolitan Museum in New York," 107-12.

The “Twin Crises”¹ of 2020:

Unfortunately, these theoretical practices about museums’ decolonization efforts would soon be put to practice in the most inconvenient way possible. The year 2020 had not one, but two crises that shook how museums viewed themselves, their practices, and their colonial legacies: the Covid-19 Pandemic and the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed it.

Museums, like basically every other institution, were not ready for Coronavirus. With a highly contagious disease spreading everywhere, museums started closing their doors *en masse*. The Covid-19 pandemic was financially devastating for museums. While museums had plans to manage a few weeks of closing, none were prepared for the months of no visitors that the pandemic caused.² As time went on with no end to the lockdowns in sight, museums started to prepare for the worst. Some museums were estimating that their revenue would be down in the coming years by almost 50%,³ and many were wondering if they would just have to close permanently. Museums around the world downsized all aspects of their institution, from laying off or furloughing staff⁴ to reducing tours and other add-ons to the general admission ticket.⁵ Their general plan was to “hope the pandemic would end in a relatively short amount of time,”⁶ and when it didn’t despite a couple of dips in cases, museums financially suffered when the crowds couldn’t come to visit.⁷ Even when lockdowns were starting to lift, the fact that people

¹ Katz and Reisman, “Impact of the 2020 Crises on the Arts and Culture in the United States: The Effect of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement in Historical Context,” 449.

² Zolnowski, “The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the American Museum Industry: A Historical Analysis, and an Inspection of Current Events, with a Look Towards the Future,” 17.

³ Zolnowski, 20.

⁴ Zolnowski, 25.

⁵ Zolnowski, 33.

⁶ Zolnowski, 33.

⁷ Zolnowski, 33.

could go visit museums didn't mean that they wanted to, and attendance stayed very low.⁸ As museum attendance floundered, both during and after the lockdown closes, museums were desperate to find a way to bring in funds, and soon many turned to digitization.

To fulfill both the educational and financial obligations that museums have, they turned to the very thing they were debating: digitalization.⁹ This digitalization impacted almost every part of the institution, from the backend administrative side to the front-end visitor experience, and affected museums of all sizes around the world. The sudden need to digitize did not affect all museums equally, as such rapid digitalization is really expensive and such favored larger, better funded museums over smaller, less well-funded ones.¹⁰ Even museums that had digitalization plans in the works felt this crunch to digitalize, as many plans were thrown into disarray as their timetable was greatly accelerated.¹¹ The pandemic created an environment where suddenly museums were more concerned about their own survival over any expansion or debates,¹² and many were quick to digitalize whether or not it was their original intention.

Even so, what are the digitalization techniques that museums used to survive during the pandemic? There were a few different ways, although many museums ended up using similar techniques that resulted in many digitalized museums looking quite similar.¹³ Many relied on continuing their normal events except making it virtual instead of in person, such as offering lectures, event, and tours online.¹⁴ Additionally, they expanded on older technologies that had

⁸ Zolnowski, 41.

⁹ Noehrer et al., "The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Data Practices in Museums and Art Galleries in the UK and the US.," 2.

¹⁰ Noehrer et al., 2.

¹¹ Noehrer et al., 5–6.

¹² Noehrer et al., "The Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Data Practices in Museums and Art Galleries in the UK and the US."

¹³ Hoffman, "Online Exhibitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic," 211.

¹⁴ James Madison's Montpelier and Wayback Machine, "Welcome to Montpelier - Enter Through Our Virtual Doors, Aug 04, 2020."

been part of the digitization for a while, such as online database for collections or new webpages that use text, images, videos, and even podcasts¹⁵ to give information. In addition, museums also tried to new technologies, most notably scanning in their physical exhibits into interactive “360° tours” where someone could virtually see the exhibit through a virtual reality headset or another kind of electronic screen.¹⁶ Many times these virtual exhibit tours had some sort of donation goal post to reach, probably to encourage the museum’s fans to keep sending in donations to keep the institution afloat.¹⁷ The rapid digitalization museums went through were almost universal, and so were some of the ways they accomplished it.

But the Covid-19 Pandemic was not the only crisis that bled into the museum world. Another was the death of George Floyd at the hand of police officers. On May 25th, 2020, police arrested George Floyd on suspicion that he had used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a convenience store. During the arrest one of the police officers, Derek Chauvin, knelt on Floyd’s neck, killing him.¹⁸ His death at the hands of police, like many other black men, was due to an over-zealous use of violence and eventually would result in Chauvin getting a twenty-two year sentence in prison.¹⁹ In the days and weeks after Floyd’s death, like many other times before, many had gathered support in protesting this injustice, however, unlike these previous times the response to Floyd’s murder was extraordinarily wide-spread. While there had been protests against police violence before, the George Floyd protests were on another level. Not only were

¹⁵ Hoffman, “Online Exhibitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” 211–12.

¹⁶ Hoffman, 211.

¹⁷ James Madison’s Montpelier and Wayback Machine, “Welcome to Montpelier - Enter Through Our Virtual Doors, Aug 04, 2020.”

¹⁸ “The Life Pressed Out: George Floyd.”

¹⁹ Karnowski and Forliti, “Chauvin Gets 22 1/2 Years in Prison for George Floyd’s Death.”

they all over the United States, but their reach also extended worldwide, with people from counties outside the United States taking interest in George Floyd's death.²⁰

Along with the protests, the public response was much more sympathetic to Floyd than previous victims of police violence. Many organizations that previously stayed out of potentially controversial events had something to say about what was happening, and some were promising change as well. Most of these responses were simple. James Madison's Montpelier, for instance, had a response that only mentioned the events indirectly, discussing the continued fight for equality for people of color and directly name-dropping the organization "Black Lives Matter" in a press release on July 4th, 2020, but not mentioning the protests or George Floyd directly.²¹ Museums were with the protesters, at least for the time being.

Three Archaeology Museums:

Historic St. Mary's City:

Historic St. Mary's City (or HSMC for short), located in St. Mary's City, MD, is one such archaeology museum. Founded in 1966 on the site of the fourth permanent English settlement in North America and the first capital of Maryland colony, its mission as told on their website is "to preserve and protect the archaeological and historical record of Maryland's first colonial capital and to appropriately develop and use this historic and scenic site for the education, enjoyment, and general benefit of the public."¹ The museum's mission is dedicated to

²⁰ Nivette, Nägel, and Gilbert, "Examining the Effects of the Killing of George Floyd by Police in the United States on Attitudes of Black Londoners: A Replication," 590.

²¹ James Madison's Montpelier, "Independence Day Message from The Montpelier Foundation."

¹ Historic St. Mary's City, "Mission & History."

“studying and interpreting the lives of those who dwelled in the area,”² which they say includes both indigenous people and “European colonists from all walks of life.”³ Although they do have historical evidence of the city, due to the city being abandoned in the early eighteenth century archaeology plays a very important role in the interpretation and research in the site. In addition to research, HSMC archaeologists also engage the public, whether that be with visitors or training new archaeologists at their long-running field school.⁴ Archaeology permeates HSMC, and without it there would be no museum.

While most museums are dependent on ticket sales, events, and other ways to bring in money from the general public, HSMC is different because it is a public institution. The Maryland State government owns and operates the museum and provide the museum with most of its funds.⁵ This gives the museum some unique differences as compared to Montpelier and the American Museum of Natural History, but one of the biggest differences are who goes to this museum. Before the Pandemic, the largest population for visitors were school children going to the museum for field trips, while general population visitors were a noticeable second place.⁶ Still, after and during the pandemic, the number of casual visitors had gone up and overtaken the school children significantly.⁷ As such, the museum’s operating budget states that one way to keep this trend going to is through increasing its digital footprint.⁸

How does Historic St. Mary’s City present their research to the public, and what kind of historical narrative does it present? Unfortunately, HSMC still largely uses their research to

² Historic St. Mary’s City.

³ Historic St. Mary’s City.

⁴ Historic St. Mary’s City, “Field School.”

⁵ Faden, “Historic St. Mary’s City Commission Fiscal Year 2023 Operating Budget Response to Department of Legislative Services Budget Analysis,” 1.

⁶ Faden, 1.

⁷ Faden, “Historic St. Mary’s City Commission Fiscal Year 2023 Operating Budget Response to Department of Legislative Services Budget Analysis.”

⁸ Faden.

endorse a colonial narrative, mostly because they were founded and are mainly funded by the Maryland State government. The Maryland government founded the museum explicitly to make “an official story”⁹ of their own past, and therefore use the narrative to legitimize their own power and ideals. The museum, therefore, focuses heavily on this idea that Maryland is a bastion of “religious, racial, and social harmony,”¹⁰ based on the Maryland founders’ desire to not make an official state religion¹¹ and their peaceful initial interactions with the local Yaocomaco people.¹² While these events technically true, they also gloss over both the fact that this religious toleration only really applied to different types of Christians¹³ and fail to mention how the English settlers ended up committing genocide against the Yaocomaco and other indigenous groups living in the area.¹⁴ The museum also conveniently erases slavery from their narrative, focusing on a their research on a time where European indentured servitude labor was more common than enslaved African labor in Maryland¹⁵ and even moving an nineteenth century plantation to an out-of-the-way spot on the museum’s property so they could focus on the time before slavery made its way to the colony.¹⁶ Historic St. Mary’s City keeps this colonial historic narrative and makes sure to keep telling it to their visitors.

Still, despite this main colonial narrative, Historic St. Mary’s City have a few decolonization projects either completed or in the works. The first is the “Struggle for Freedom Exhibit,” which was completed before the pandemic. The physical exhibit is “located in a building originally built to house the men and women owned by the Brome Plantation,”¹⁷ and is

⁹ King, *Archaeology, Narrative, and the Politics of the Past: The View from Southern Maryland*, 96.

¹⁰ King, 53.

¹¹ King, 83.

¹² Friesen, “The Woodland Indians of Southern Maryland,” 6.

¹³ Leone, *The Archaeology of Liberty in an American Capital : Excavations in Annapolis*, 52.

¹⁴ Merrell, “Cultural Continuity among the Piscataway Indians of Colonial Maryland,” 548.

¹⁵ Friesen, “Indentured Servants,” 2.

¹⁶ “SM-33 Brome-Howard House.”

¹⁷ Historic St. Mary’s City, “The Struggle for Freedom Exhibit.”

located away from the main part of the museum near museum-owned Inn at Brome Howard, a bed and breakfast made from the relocated plantation house mentioned in the previous paragraph. The second, and incomplete project, is the People to People Project. This project, a joint effort between the museum's archaeology department and the Piscataway community, was conceived when the museum's archaeologists finally located the fort that marked the very first European settlement in Maryland.¹⁸ Rather than continue the colonial narrative, the museum's archaeologists and the Piscataway community have decided to work together to present "a more complete version of St. Mary's City's rich history," and interpret the colony's earliest days through a more indigenous lens.¹⁹ While the project is still very much in its beginning stages, its potential is exciting for the museum's decolonization efforts.

Nevertheless, how does the museum present these projects online? The answer is mixed. The "Struggle for Freedom" exhibit is very bare bones, with only a two-sentence summary, five pictures of people looking at the exhibit, and such information like its location and whether it has restrooms open to the public.²⁰ Even this information is not completely correct, as while the text instructions say the exhibit is about a mile from the visitors' center the embedded map on the page places it at the visitors' center itself, and nowhere on the web page does it explicitly state that the exhibit is near the Inn at Brome Howard.²¹ On the other hand, the website about the People to People project is very rich with information, with separate pages about the project's mission, general history, specific histories about the pre-European Yaocomaco sites and the English fort, and small biographies of everyone on the project.²² It even has a news and updates

¹⁸ Historic St. Mary's City, "People to People: The Project."

¹⁹ Historic St. Mary's City.

²⁰ Historic St. Mary's City, "The Struggle for Freedom Exhibit."

²¹ Historic St. Mary's City.

²² Historic St. Mary's City, "People to People: Exploring Native-Colonial Interactions in Early Maryland."

section, although due to its newness there is not much on the web page other than the project's own creation date.²³ Overall, the museum's website is a mixed bag when it comes to telling potential visitors about their decolonization projects, ranging from a poorly designed website whose only goal to get visitors to the physical exhibit to a well thought out site where people can learn about a decolonization project at home.

This mixed bag of digitalization on the HSMC website extended to their response during the pandemic. On the front page in mid-April the HSMC website had no digital programs advertised. Instead, underneath a notice that says the museum is closed and that all events are canceled as per state regulations, there are notices for more in-person events!²⁴ While these events are mostly for the summer and beyond, with the one scheduled for April has been "POSTPONED (date to be determined)."²⁵ The only bit of online media created in response to the pandemic is a small paragraph that urges people to take care of their mental health. This paragraph comes with a link to a YouTube video, which the museum claims was "magically taken in 1667 when the main concern was the seasoning."²⁶ As the seasoning was a seventeenth century term for a variety of illnesses that English colonists got, this is almost certainly referencing the pandemic.²⁷ Nonetheless, this video was actually made before pandemic in 2019, and features nothing about the seasoning but rather actors portraying seventeenth century children playing a board game.²⁸ While there was eventually a vague announcement about the

²³ Historic St. Mary's City, "People to People: News & Updates."

²⁴ Historic St. Mary's City and Wayback Machine, "Historic St. Mary's City, April 14th, 2020."

²⁵ Historic St. Mary's City and Wayback Machine.

²⁶ Historic St. Mary's City and Wayback Machine.

²⁷ Hutchinson, *Disease and Discrimination : Poverty and Pestilence in Colonial Atlantic America*, 109.

²⁸ *Meet Ann, Mary, and Jane*.

People to People project on the main page,²⁹ ultimately very little about the museum's small decolonization efforts are mentioned on the websites.

While the main website has truly little to say about HSMC's decolonization projects, their YouTube channel is much more talkative. The channel is modest, with less than 70 videos and only about 60,000 total views at the time that this paper was written. Still, its content has much more to do with the museum's decolonialization efforts than most of their website. Of the museum's channel's top ten most-viewed videos, three are about decolonization in general and two are about the People to People project in particular. Additionally, much of the content on the channel from the past two years are about indigenous people, enslaved Africans, or other ways to challenge the colonial narrative.³⁰ This greater focus on decolonization is a stark contrast to the main website where it is hardly mentioned.

Contrasting their responses to the pandemic, the museum's response to George Floyd's murder was surprisingly topical and easy to access. On June 11th, 2020, there was message from the museum's then executive director Regina Falden about George Floyd's murder on the museum's website's front page. Unlike many other museums, the response not only mentioned Floyd's death explicitly, but also tied his death to other people's death as part of larger systemic issue that both needs to be fixed and is one where the museum itself is perpetrating. Additionally, Dr. Falden's statement mentioned how the museum as an institution talked to some "respected community members" about the museum can do moving forward the response was a simple but concise "we are willing to help you do better if you [Historic St. Mary's City] are willing to listen to us and to make real change." While there is, of course no tangible policy changes

²⁹ Historic St. Mary's City and Wayback Machine, "Historic St. Mary's City, March 29th, 2021."

³⁰ Historic St. Mary's City, "Historic St. Mary's City."

mentioned in the statement,³¹ the announcement of the People to People Project only a few months later could be a concrete commitment of this verbal vow.³² Never the less, as the pandemic waned this pledge has vanished from the museum's website, not even with other press releases,³³ and so in addition with the People to People Project itself in limbo it is now unclear if the museum is still trying to keep up with their promise.

James Madison's Montpelier

James Madison's Montpelier, located in Montpelier Station, VA, is another such museum. The site of the United States' fourth president's personal home and plantation, the museum's main website states that the museum is "A memorial to James Madison and the Enslaved Community, a museum of American history, and a center for constitutional education that engages the public with the enduring legacy of Madison's most powerful idea: government by the people."³⁴ The museum itself consists of several exhibit buildings, and visitor center, and many gardens and trails for the visitors to see.³⁵ They also have a large archaeology department, which not only does much of the research for the museum but provide educational and volunteer opportunities as well.³⁶ Much of the work that the museum's archaeology department does involves the enslaved community on the site, as they and their daily lives are often not

³¹ Historic St. Mary's City, Wayback Machine, and Faden, "Historic St. Mary's City, June 22nd, 2020."

³² Historic St. Mary's City, "People to People: News & Updates."

³³ Historic St. Mary's City and Buck, "Press & Media."

³⁴ James Madison's Montpelier, "James Madison's Montpelier."

³⁵ James Madison's Montpelier, "Grounds, Trails, & Shop Open Thurs.-Mon., 9 AM-3 PM. Guided Tours Offered."

³⁶ James Madison's Montpelier, "Archaeology Programs."

mentioned in the surviving historical record.³⁷ All in all, James' Madison's Montpelier is a fine museum that interprets the history around one of the United States' founders.

Like many of the other museums based upon the houses of the United States so called "founding fathers," James Madison's Montpelier engages somewhat in the traditional colonial narrative that museums have. Even though the museum is named after the United States' slaveholding fourth president, and much of its symbols used in the logo and marketing use the main plantation house and its formal buildings, the museum itself is not completely focused on the colonial narrative of the founding father. The museum does also work outside this colonial view, having a center that goes into depth about the United States' constitution³⁸ and lots of work studying the enslaved people who lived on the plantation, work that the museum has done alongside the descendants of those very same people.³⁹ These two areas often work together, especially in situations about how the slavery addressed (or didn't address) slavery in the United States.⁴⁰ Ultimately, it is these two programs that make the decolonization efforts of this museum.

As part of the Montpelier's public education, the museum takes inspiration on how James Madison is considered the man responsible for the United States' constitution and has a center devoted to educating the public about the constitution and what it means in the contemporary world.⁴¹ Still, this public education is less about how the document should work and more about what it actually says, or in some cases, what it doesn't say.⁴² Because of this goal, the center has

³⁷ James Madison's Montpelier, "Archaeology for All: Montpelier Engages Public Help to Unearth America's Buried Past."

³⁸ James Madison's Montpelier, "The Center for the Constitution."

³⁹ James Madison's Montpelier, "Enslaved Community."

⁴⁰ James Madison's Montpelier, "Slavery, the Constitution, and a Lasting Legacy."

⁴¹ James Madison's Montpelier, "The Center for the Constitution."

⁴² James Madison's Montpelier, "A Democratic Experiment: America's Trust In, and Expectations Of, the Constitution."

several different groups of people it specifically has programs for, namely educators and public servants like law enforcement and politicians.⁴³ These programs are both in-person and online and help to teach the museums in person and online visitors about a new, truer, narrative of the past and the United States' institutions.

Additionally, as compared to HSMC and AMNH, James Madison's Montpelier is a relatively new museum. For much of its history, Montpelier was a residential complex, most recently in the 1980s when the DuPont family finally gave the site to the National Historic Trust. From the 2000s, the site has been co-owned by the Montpelier Foundation and,⁴⁴ starting in 2021, the Montpelier Descendants Committee, who together run the museum's operations and content.⁴⁵ This newness as reduced, although not completely eliminated the colonial history of the museum, as the museum itself is still heavily focused on the colonial narrative of the United States' so-called "Founding Fathers."

Although Montpelier's Center for the Constitution does do some decolonization work, most of the museum's decolonization projects come from their work with the Descendant Community studying the enslaved people on the plantation. As the website states, "Montpelier honors the lives of the enslaved through ongoing slavery interpretation," and has many different subpages to the main webpage that talk about various projects.⁴⁶ While the museum's archaeology department is involved heavily with this research, it is not the only such one, as the aforementioned Center for the Constitution and the museum's historians also contribute to this decolonization efforts.⁴⁷ While the museum has many smaller projects that talk about the often-

⁴³ James Madison's Montpelier, "The Center for the Constitution."

⁴⁴ James Madison's Montpelier, "Montpelier's Owners."

⁴⁵ James Madison's Montpelier, "'Structural Parity' in Unprecedented Board Restructuring."

⁴⁶ James Madison's Montpelier, "Enslaved Community."

⁴⁷ James Madison's Montpelier.

forgotten history of enslaved people, their most important in-person exhibit is the “Mere Distinction of Colour” exhibit. This exhibit, first built in 2018, is a three-part affair, with the first part talking about slavery as a United States institution and its legacies, the second part discussing slavery and Montpelier through the eyes of the descendants of those enslaved there, and the third being the reconstructed South Yard, where the enslaved people who worked in the main house lived.⁴⁸ These exhibits are a powerful look at slavery through a decolonized lens and are one of the most important parts of the museum.

Additionally, unlike many other museums’ decolonization efforts, Montpelier’s ones have extended to institutional changes. Or, at least, it briefly. On June 19th, 2021, the Montpelier Foundation Board, the board of directors for the museum, voted to make the board for the Descendant Community equal in power to themselves when making decisions about the direction of the museum.⁴⁹ This is huge news, as it is an institutional change based upon the ideas of decolonization. This brilliant move, however, appeared to be short-lived, as less than a year later on March 25th, 2022, with little fanfare, the museum’s board voted to strip this new board of all their power.⁵⁰ While the head of the board claims that the museum is “very, very committed,” to telling a truer narrative about the enslaved people living on the site, many in the descendant community and elsewhere were skeptical of this promise.⁵¹ After this backtrack, it seemed like institutional change was a needed step that no museum board is willing to take.

Although, this tale of James Madison’s Montpelier is not yet done. After public backlash and the National Historic Trust getting involved, Montpelier has retracted their disbanding of the

⁴⁸ James Madison’s Montpelier, “The Mere Distinction of Colour.”

⁴⁹ James Madison’s Montpelier, “‘Structural Parity’ in Unprecedented Board Restructuring.”

⁵⁰ Schneider, “James Madison’s Montpelier Strips Power from Enslaved Descendants Group.”

⁵¹ Schneider.

Descendant Community Board and returned the fired employees to their posts.⁵² This announcement was on their website. It seems like real institutional change is something that will be a hard-fought battle.

While the in person exhibits and institutional structure in the background was in a constant state of flux, the online resources created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was less of an internal battle. Montpelier, even before the Pandemic, had a plethora of resources on their website. Before March of 2020 there were a few articles about the “Mere Distinction of Colour” exhibit⁵³ and their Center for the Constitution.⁵⁴ Additionally, promptly at the start of the pandemic Montpelier had their online resources up and available to the public, proudly proclaiming right on their front page that while the museum might not be open visitors can “stay connected with [them] online!”⁵⁵ It then offers the visitor a hyperlink that leads to another webpage that lays out all their virtual programs.⁵⁶ These include things such as virtual tours, podcasts, videos, online courses, and webinars.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, except for online virtual tours, most of the exhibits on the website were not a direct digitalization of a physical exhibit but rather an extension of the physical museum. To put it simply, none of the digitalized content is a direct digitalization of an existing physical exhibit, and instead are companion pieces that offer additional information to what is said in the physical exhibits. These companion pieces include things like slavery’s continuing legacy in the constitution⁵⁸ and the article that talks about the Descendant Community board of directors,

⁵² James Madison’s Montpelier, “Parity Results in Leadership Change.”

⁵³ James Madison’s Montpelier, “Enslaved Community.”

⁵⁴ James Madison’s Montpelier, “The Center for the Constitution.”

⁵⁵ James Madison’s Montpelier and Wayback Machine, “James Madison’s Montpelier, April 5th, 2020.”

⁵⁶ James Madison’s Montpelier and Wayback Machine, “Welcome to Montpelier - Enter Through Our Virtual Doors, Aug 04, 2020.”

⁵⁷ James Madison’s Montpelier and Wayback Machine.

⁵⁸ James Madison’s Montpelier, “Slavery, the Constitution, and a Lasting Legacy.”

which continued to stay up on the website even during the time where said board was removed from their position.⁵⁹ Interestingly enough though, the whole change about their board was not mentioned at all on their website. As mentioned before, the websites made no mention of this ongoing internal debate, but neither did it remove what was already done from the webpages. It was only after the board was reintroduced that acknowledgement of the change was finally addressed, and it was to tell the public that the museum's mistake was fixed.⁶⁰ For whatever reason, the museum kept this information from its main sites.

Still, these webpages on the museum's site that gave context or other outside information about the in-person exhibits are not the only online resources that the museum has. James Madison's Montpelier has a companion website to their own museum's website. Called Montpelier's Digital Doorway, it is billed as a "behind-the-scenes" look at the museum's research and programs.⁶¹ While they do have sections for professionals, much of the resources on the site are for the public.⁶² Instead of adding information to in-person exhibits, the website is divided into twenty projects across the five main departments at the museum.⁶³ The projects, however, are not limited to one specific department, and there is some overlap between them. For instance, the project called "The South Yard Dwellings," which deals with the reconstruction of the housing that the enslaved people who worked in the main plantation house lived, is part of the Archaeology, Architecture & Preservation, Curatorial & Collections, and Research departments, as all these departments had to work together to complete this reconstruction.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ James Madison's Montpelier, "'Structural Parity' in Unprecedented Board Restructuring."

⁶⁰ James Madison's Montpelier, "Our Stories."

⁶¹ James Madison's Montpelier, "Montpelier Museum Programs."

⁶² James Madison's Montpelier.

⁶³ James Madison's Montpelier, "Projects."

⁶⁴ James Madison's Montpelier, "The South Yard Dwellings."

These projects make up the bulk of the Digital Doorway, and they help create an entire online museum experience that is not necessarily building off an in-person exhibit.

The American Museum of Natural History:

Of all the museums explored in this paper, the American Museum of Natural History has the most complex and controversial history, especially in how they treated African and Indigenous Americans. The museum's "cultural halls" are the both the oldest and the least kept-up-to-date parts in the museum, and often show a "suppressed history of protracted encounters between colonizers and the peoples being colonized" that are portrayed as a look at various non-western cultures before European contact.⁶⁵ This was no accident, as many of the early influential heads of the museum were eager to colonialism, like Henry Fairfield Osborn. He was an avid eugenicist who even hosted conferences about this racist theory,⁶⁶ and he is still celebrated in the museum since he helped create the museum's world-famous paleontology department.⁶⁷ There are many more of these examples of the injustices of colonization at the AMNH, both in what they say (such as an over-emphasis of blood sacrifices in Aztec culture and displaying sensitive cultural objects in the Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians) to what they don't say (like in a painfully small exhibit about African Slavery that fails to mention much about slavery in the United States and exhibit texts that fail to mention the genocides of indigenous Americans.)⁶⁸ While all these museums deal with the consequences of colonization, the AMNH has the most work that needs to be done. While the AMNH is notorious for its colonial narrative

⁶⁵ Harding and Martin, "Anthropology Now and Then in the American Museum of Natural History."

⁶⁶ American Natural History Museum, "Addressing the Statue."

⁶⁷ NYC Stands with Standing Rock et al., "2nd Annual Anti-Columbus Day Tour: Decolonize This Museum," 3.

⁶⁸ NYC Stands with Standing Rock et al., 3–7.

about non-western cultures, there have been some attempts to address this. One such attempt is in their “Addressing the Statue” exhibit. The exhibit, created in 2019 to address the controversy around the state-owned “Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt,” that used to be displayed outside the museum’s main entrance, existed as a physical exhibit in the museum’s main building.⁶⁹ While the museum said it “must also acknowledge the Museum’s own imperfect history,” ultimately this exhibit doesn’t take a side but rather makes a “foundation for honest, respectful, open dialogue” about the Museum’s colonial past.⁷⁰

While the “Addressing the Statue” exhibit was a physical exhibit, it also had an online presence. In fact, the online presence is essentially a digital transcript of the exhibit, with individual sections about the original intentions behind the statue’s creation,⁷¹ a scholarly look at the statue and what it means,⁷² and different people’s perspectives on what to do with this statue.⁷³ Instead of keeping the exhibit behind the wall of physically going to the museum and paying the admission fee, the museum put the information online so that everyone with an internet connection could learn about this colonial narrative and its critiques.

This exhibit, however, was all in the past, and the physical exhibit is no longer present in the museum’s halls. Once New York State gave the museum permission to move the Roosevelt Statue the physical exhibit came down, while the museum moved the digital component from the main page to their archived section.⁷⁴ So far nothing has replaced this exhibit; now that the Roosevelt Statue has been removed from outside the museum it is now out of the mind of museum. While visitors can still see the archived webpage, the physical component has now

⁶⁹ American Natural History Museum, “Addressing the Statue.”

⁷⁰ American Natural History Museum.

⁷¹ American Natural History Museum, “What Did the Artists and Planners Intend?”

⁷² American Natural History Museum, “How Is the Statue Understood Today?”

⁷³ American Natural History Museum, “Perspectives on the Statue.”

⁷⁴ American Natural History Museum and Wayback Machine, “Exhibitions, January 25th, 2022.”

joined all the other temporary exhibits and no longer physically exists. This whole project can only be accessed now on the internet, and the discussion about the museum's own past can now only be seen by someone who is really looking for it. This is a shame, as the underlining history of why this statue was erected in the first place is still there, but now no longer talked about. If the museum genuinely wants to address its colonial past, at the very least it must continue talking about its colonial existence in the open manner it was with this exhibit.

Still, the AMNH still has a current decolonization project, although it is rather small. In addition to the "Addressing the Stature" exhibit, the AMNH also has addressed their museum's colonial legacies in their recontextualization of a diorama depicting the early Dutch colony in modern-day Manhattan. Much like the "Addressing the Statue" exhibit, this diorama has both a physical location in the museum and an online presence. For the physical section, it consists of a diorama depicting a meeting between the Lenape and Dutch in the 1660s. Constructed in 1939, the diorama has "common clichés and a fictional view of the past that ignores how complex and violent colonization was for Native people." In 2018, however, many labels were attached to the diorama telling any viewer the historical inaccuracies and clichés the diorama depicts and how the museum is working with the Lenape Nation today to fix how the museum discusses them and their culture. A supplement of this physical exhibit, there is an online component, although instead of a full transcript for the exhibit like with the "Addressing the Statue" exhibit instead the website has two lesson plans for teachers to use, as well as a video discussing the discussions around this reexamining of the museum's narrative.⁷⁵

The digital location of these online exhibits is also important, as like other museums the American Natural History Museum had their projects both on their own website and others too.

⁷⁵ American Natural History Museum, "Old New York Diorama."

The digital synopsis of both the diorama exhibit and the “Addressing the Statue” were hosted on the main site. Even the videos about them, although they are technically hosted on YouTube, are made available for viewing right on their website without having to go to another page.⁷⁶ While the online information about their decolonization efforts is hard to find, once someone does find them, they are easy to read without going to a different website. This does allow visitors to the museum’s website to find these projects easier, although the fact that they are still buried in the archives doesn’t mean that this is easy, just easier. The AMNH is the only museum I looked at to host most of its digital decolonization efforts on their main site. Both HSMC and James Madison’s Montpelier both have much of their decolonization projects’ digital versions on separate websites, with HSMC’s People to People project having its own distinct page⁷⁷ and Montpelier having another website host all their digital exhibits created during the Pandemic, including the ones about their decolonization projects.⁷⁸ So, while the AMNH’s decolonization efforts have a paltry online presence, at least what is available is right on the museum’s main website and relatively easy to find.

The “Addressing the Statue” exhibit and the “Old New York” diorama were not the only online part of the museum, however. After the Pandemic, the AMNH had a whole sub-section of their website devoted to their new digitalized exhibits. As befitting an institution the size of the AMNH, there was a large variety of different ways a visitor could experience the museum virtually, from guided virtual tours of the exhibit spaces to lectures and behind-the-scenes videos to even small educational video games that kids (and I’m sure some adults as well) could play. They also included resources for educators to help engage students in an academic environment

⁷⁶ American Natural History Museum and Wayback Machine, “Explore, April 1st, 2020.”

⁷⁷ Historic St. Mary’s City, “People to People: The Project.”

⁷⁸ James Madison’s Montpelier, “Projects.”

and a whole new website specifically for teaching children about science.⁷⁹ While many of virtual experiences are now gone from the website at the time this paper was written, the museum still keeps a good selection of different virtual ways to learn on the museum's website.⁸⁰

Although the ANHM had a wide range of digital programs introduced during the pandemic, most of the virtual experiences were based upon the museum's hard science sections. Programs featuring biology, astronomy, climatology, and paleontology were prominently displayed on the explore section of the website, offering visitors a chance to learn about the science related exhibits the museum has.⁸¹ The video section of the "explore" tab is even explicitly labeled "Science Videos."⁸² Nevertheless, the hard sciences are only one part of the museum, with another major component are the anthropological "Cultural Halls."⁸³ However, these cultural halls had almost no presence in the museum's digital offerings on its website, with only the odd video.⁸⁴ Even the virtual museum tours done with Google's Arts and Culture initiative did not focus on the museum's anthropological exhibits, with the virtual walkthroughs so well hidden one might not even realize they are there unless they accidentally hit a button that directs them to the digitalized walkthrough.⁸⁵ On the AMNH's website, its hard science exhibits are shown off while the cultural exhibits are left out of the spotlight.

As the digital exhibits are much more focused on hard sciences than Anthropology, the lesser amounts of the digitalized cultural material are mostly the in-person exhibits or a handful of videos in the science videos tab. While it is not advertised at all, it is possible to take a virtual

⁷⁹ American Natural History Museum and Wayback Machine, "Explore, April 1st, 2020."

⁸⁰ American Natural History Museum, "Explore."

⁸¹ American Natural History Museum and Wayback Machine, "Explore, April 1st, 2020."

⁸² American Natural History Museum, "Explore: Videos."

⁸³ American Natural History Museum, "Permanent Exhibitions."

⁸⁴ American Natural History Museum, "Explore."

⁸⁵ Google Arts and Culture and American Natural History Museum, "American Museum of Natural History."

walk through the museum's cultural halls showing off world-wide cultures, although often times the text and artifacts are so small on the screen that very little information can be gleaned from this at-home tour.⁸⁶ Similarly, while there are videos about the various cultural halls in the museum, they are not shown off on the front page of the "explore" section⁸⁷ and have to be manually searched for through the video archive.⁸⁸ While present on the website, the digitalized exhibits and videos about the museum's cultural exhibits are almost hidden bits of information, only available to someone who is really looking.

Since the virtual anthropological museum pieces are out of focus in the museum, the museum's decolonization projects about those exhibits are too. As mentioned before, it takes some effort to find the digital content about the museum's decolonization projects, requiring a visitor to the museum's website to actively search for them on the website. This difficulty was made worse once the "Addressing the Statue" exhibit was moved to the museum archives, as this moved from a prominent place in the "special exhibits" section of the website to one buried in the "past exhibits" section.⁸⁹

In fact, it is interesting that the "Addressing the Statue" exhibit is now in the "past exhibits" website section. It shows a distinct theme in the AMNH's approach to their past faults: they are in the past. To the museum, their sins are in the past, and they don't have to bring them up again. Their cultural exhibits are being buried, almost in reverse of the archaeology that was used to make them.

However, the museum's official response to George Floyd's murder does buck this trend of keeping the museum's past mistakes in the past. While having no official public response to

⁸⁶ Google Arts and Culture and American Natural History Museum.

⁸⁷ American Natural History Museum, "Explore."

⁸⁸ American Natural History Museum, "Explore: Videos."

⁸⁹ American Natural History Museum, "Past Exhibitions."

the murder, they did have an internal memo about Floyd's murder that talked about the museum's response to it. The memo briefly mentions Floyd's death, then talks about the statue, the controversy around it before talking about New York City's commission ruling about the statue by saying that it is now their decision to remove the Roosevelt Statue. This memo was released in full to the public in the museum's official announcement. While the museum does mention the statue's controversial history, it only changes its position as an unbiased mediator reluctantly, with the memo making the explicit point that the museum finally "recognizes the importance of taking a position at this time."⁹⁰ It also admits that this step is the only the first of many to come.

On one hand, the American Museum of Natural History is promising to change how it is examining its own past, but on the other it is continuing to selectively not discuss its history within its own halls. With seemingly exact opposites both true, it appears that the museum's administration has created a goal with two mutually exclusive end goals. Nevertheless, this is untrue, as the museum's goals can be achieved together. The answer is simple: these new decolonization projects are online only, using the museum's website and other platforms. For example, on the AMNH's website, there are many videos about various topics, some about the museum's decolonization work, but these videos are online, coming off YouTube and embedded into the museum's website.⁹¹ Additionally, new projects, like the museum's Gilder Center, are purely scientific parts of the museum's collections.⁹² The American Natural History Museum's attempts to directly address their colonial legacy only exist online, and at this moment are not coming into the museum's halls more than they already have.

⁹⁰ American Natural History Museum, "AMNH Requests the Equestrian Statue on Central Park West Be Moved."

⁹¹ American Natural History Museum, "Explore: Videos."

⁹² Kimmelman and Fisher, "Wonder and Awe in Natural History's New Wing. Butterflies, Too."

Performative Decolonization:

Museums using websites to be their primary venue for new decolonization is not a universal phenomenon, however. For James Madison's Montpelier, the museum has their own designated website for all their pandemic-related digitalized museum projects, their decolonized ones included. On their main website, they have a list of various articles, with many about the lives of the people living in slavery on the site and slavery's continuing effects in the United States and the world.

Like the AMNH and Montpelier, HSMC has multiple pages for their main museum sites and their People to People project. As for whether it is more like the American Museum of Natural History of Montpelier, it takes after the former, as there is little mentioning about it on their main site, with almost all the scant details about the project on this separate website. While the official People to People site was accessible from the main museum site, it required digging through the archaeology events to find.¹

What does it mean that the videos about decolonization are not on the main site but instead on auxiliary sites? So far, that reason is unknown, as it is behind many non-disclosure agreements. We can speculate on these reasons why, and a few come into focus. It could be to organize the projects or make the individual ones easier to find. Still, it could also be the opposite, to hide these projects and separate them from the museums. Finding these projects' websites requires a bit of digging.

Based on the following information, it seems that the Covid-19 pandemic had little to do with the digitalization of museum's decolonization projects, other than accelerating the

¹ Historic St. Mary's City, "Archaeology at HSMC."

timetable. The museums that had plans to digitize their decolonization efforts already in the works worked to release them during the pandemic, while the museums that didn't did not.

Additionally, it appears that much of the digitalized content was purely for the pandemic and started to be phased out once museums started reopening their doors. As of April 8, 2022, many of the museum's websites removed digitalized content from their webpages.

What caused this change in direction? It is as if these unprecedented changes were in response to unprecedented times, and with those time over the changes were quickly reverted. I call this "performative decolonization." The goal of performative decolonization is not to decolonize the museum, but to make it seem like it is to gain good publicity.

Performative decolonization starts with a promise: that the museum will decolonize. They then start to go through various methods to decolonize. For instance, the AMNH put up the context for the diorama for the meeting between the Dutch and the Lenape², or James Madison's Montpelier started including their Descendant Community more in exhibit creation and having an administrative position supposedly equal to the board of directors. Most of these changes are very publicized, like with James Madison's Montpelier, who announced that they were creating a new board not only in various press releases but also on their own website.³

Another part of performative decolonization involves timely events, in this case George Floyd's murder and the public's reaction against it. But it was not the only one. Many of these decolonization projects started during events where a museum's colonial past would be front and center. The AMNH didn't put up this exhibit about the statue until after a few very high-profile protests against it.⁴ Likewise, Montpelier's temporary inclusion of the descendant community as

² American Natural History Museum, "Old New York Diorama."

³ James Madison's Montpelier, "'Structural Parity' in Unprecedented Board Restructuring."

⁴ Coleman, "Angered by This Roosevelt Statue? A Museum Wants Visitors to Weigh In."

a separate board coincides with the first Juneteenth after the George Floyd protests.⁵ The timing of these events seem to suggest that the museums wish to capitalize on the controversy, whether it be for educational reasons or, more likely, gain to use these events to help their public image as an up-to-date educational institution.

That being said, some these decolonization efforts are not an active conspiracy to use events like George Floyd's murder to get some sort of selfish benefit. Sometimes, existing institutional norms get in the way of good-faith desire to change. Financial obligations are one of them. These financial obligations that museums and other cultural institutions had during the Covid-19 pandemic actively worked against their promises to decolonize. For instance, hiring a more racially diverse staff often is stopped by layoffs, which often "disproportionately affect staff of color."⁶ Similarly, the structural changes to Montpelier's board has been a long-time goal of many in the museum, one that they celebrated when it happened.⁷ Still, once one influential member of the board felt threatened by this inclusion of the Descendant Community in positions of actual authority, the changes brought on just one year before were quickly rolled back, with the people who supported these changes removed from their positions.⁸ Additionally, during the pandemic the American Museum of Natural History's Gilder Center was as expensive as it was impressive.⁹ This project likely took funds needed to update the existing galleries. Institutional norms often function as roadblocks to promised changes, causing even minor changes to be unattainable.

⁵ James Madison's Montpelier, "'Structural Parity' in Unprecedented Board Restructuring."

⁶ Zolnowski, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the American Museum Industry: A Historical Analysis, and an Inspection of Current Events, with a Look Towards the Future."

⁷ James Madison's Montpelier, "'Structural Parity' in Unprecedented Board Restructuring."

⁸ Wise, "Montpelier Says It's Open to Parity with Slave Descendants. Descendants Call Foul."

⁹ Kimmelman and Fisher, "Wonder and Awe in Natural History's New Wing. Butterflies, Too."

But not all projects end with controversy. Others just fizzle out without much happening. This might be the case with HSMC's "People to People" project. While there were a few updates in the beginning, there has been no updates in two years, with the last update that the Maryland Governor had visited the site.¹⁰ While I assume it still exists since the website is up, that is no guarantee, as Montpelier had their announcement that the Descendants Board was still in existence even though when it was not. Honestly, I wish I had more to say about what happened. Some news article, or an interview, or just another update on the website. Any update would do, even one that says the project had been cancelled. But there is nothing, just a press release from over two years ago saying Larry Hogan, former governor of Maryland, visited the original fort's site to see how the excavations were doing. Of course, there is speculation, especially since the Maryland State government owns the museum and uses it to create a narrative of their own past that they want told.¹¹ Or, perhaps negotiations between the museum and the Piscataway Nation are still on-gong and must be resolved before the project can continue. But I cannot say if any of these theories are accurate, as there is just nothing publicly available which I can base evidence on. While Historic St. Mary's City knows the state of the "People to People" Project, the rest of the public does not, but hopefully one day it will be formally cancelled or come to fruition.

¹⁰ Historic St. Mary's City, "People to People: News & Updates."

¹¹ King, *Archaeology, Narrative, and the Politics of the Past: The View from Southern Maryland*, 89.

Conclusion:

The mission to decolonize museums may seem an almost impossible task, and to talk about everything about it would be far beyond the scope of this paper. However, when it comes to addressing the colonial narrative in archaeology museums, many prominent museums have had projects in their repertoire. Starting out by seeking genuine cooperation with Indigenous people, descendants of enslaved Africans, or other groups affected by European or American colonization efforts, these museums work with these groups to make exhibits about themselves in a way that they want to be made. To help with these efforts, these new decolonization projects often made use of new technologies, particularly the internet, to show their project to as many people as possible.

While the desire is there, the business aspects of museums are in many ways hampering these efforts. The nature of the American non-profit museum makes it so that these decolonization projects are deemed to be not being popular and therefore not able to bring in visitors and therefore money. So, these decolonization projects were relegated mostly into either small exhibits on site or exclusively online, unless the museum had some sort of scandal about its past that it had to address like with the American Museum of natural history. Still, this reasoning all changed during the Covid-19 Pandemic, where museums couldn't get visitors into their halls and there was a substantial increase in public awareness about museums' colonial pasts. Suddenly, museums wanted to focus on these projects, often including them with their attempts to digitalize to make up for the lack of visitors coming in-person. And real change seemed possible, with new projects coming out and even some museums making fundamental changes to how their institution operates.

Ultimately, when the pandemic waned and visitors and money started to come back, museums' interest in these projects diminished as well. Ongoing projects were deemed complete, new ones stalled, and institutional changes were rolled back. It was only due to the efforts of individuals working at these museums and the community that these attempts at decolonization continued.

Since the American Museum of Natural History's, James Madison's Montpelier's, and Historic Saint Mary's City's various decolonization projects are in vastly different statuses, one might be tempted to preform something of a post-mortem on them. Whether to analyze the details of their creation, execution, and the reasons why they are still going on today, it is the temptation of scholars to examine the projects, not only to figure out why events turned out the way they did but also to use this information to create other projects in other museums, and this reasoning is sound. When looking at these projects and their lifespans, a theme starts to emerge: how the determination of individuals and communities of people outside the museum's institutions are the driving force for these programs.

Even though many think of museum work as something that the museum does on their own, as a nebulous institution without outside help, these three museums demonstrate how specific individuals collaborating with a community invested in the project can bring it to fruition. For the American Museum of Natural History, it was public awareness of the Roosevelt's statue's controversial history that resulted in the exhibit being made and the statue finally being taken down. Likewise, at James Madison's Montpelier, the Descendant Community working with the Archaeology department was what created the "Mere Distinction of Colour" exhibit, and at Historic Saint Mary's city the Piscataway Nation along with the museum's

Archaeology department and other scholars are behind the “People to People” project. It is these individuals, not the museum that they work for, that are driving these projects.

So, what does this mean for future decolonization projects in other museums? Simply put, museums do not decolonize themselves: it is individuals in those museums supported by a community devoted to this goal that makes these changes. Institutions will not change themselves, and in fact, as the AMNH and James Madison’s Montpelier showed, will often try to revert any changes that they manage to accomplish. This change based on community and not institutions it is not just about museums however, as it is what happened when people were protesting George Floyd’s murder during the Coronavirus pandemic. The people saw an injustice and took steps to make sure that this injustice was fixed, and some positive change did occur. While it might have been slight changes overall, and these changes that did have some pushback from those who don’t wish to see them, the people who challenged the institution about the injustice that they saw did manage to see some results. It is the same with museums. Even though museums are decolonizing at an exceedingly small rate, people outside the institution are making these changes possible, and some changes are better than none. The journey to decolonize museums has been a long one and has been around for as long as the idea of decolonization has been around. For the longest time, however, decolonization was only an academic curiosity and not something museums in the United States themselves were interested in. This was due in part to the strong connections that museums in the United States had with commercialization, how museums had to act like businesses so that they could get enough funds that the need to stay operational. Still, as time went on and the American public became more interested in learning about and having museums go through with decolonization efforts, the museums started to dip their toes into addressing their colonial past. These efforts drastically

escalated in 2020, where public interest in addressing institutions' past wrongs, as well as the lack of ticket sales brought on by the Covid-19 Pandemic, made it so that museums were willing to go even farther, although once the pandemic went on and the museums reopened for visitors many of their efforts were rescinded.

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