

Rainey Tisdale

The American Revolution in Boston: A Blessing and a Curse

Boston is known as the birthplace of the American Revolution. Because the Revolution is such a significant local and national story, it has come to dominate the public history landscape in Boston. The Revolution is everywhere: in the way the city markets itself to the outside world, in the names of local businesses, and most importantly, in the form of the Freedom Trail, a group of sixteen 18th-century historic sites linked by a red line winding through the city's central neighborhoods.

Boston's emphasis on the Revolution is a double-edged sword. On one hand, an estimated three million people walk the Freedom Trail each year: historic sites in other cities turn green with envy at the thought of such traffic. On the other hand, with so many resources devoted to this narrow historical time period and its tourist audience, serving the city's residents effectively becomes a challenge; locals want a very different kind of public history: neighborhood history, ethnic history, 20th-century history. Moreover, while the Freedom Trail is a great marketing tool, its format often fragments and oversimplifies a complex story, preventing the public from walking away with an accurate and coherent narrative. In Boston, what many would expect to be easy history is surprisingly difficult.

My presentation will outline the details of the Revolution's "monopoly" on the city's history, suggest strategies for bringing balance to Boston, and also explore the general phenomenon of one particular historical era claiming a disproportionate amount of a city or region's cultural heritage.

CV

Rainey Tisdale is an independent curator specializing in urban history and city museums. She has held curatorial positions at the Bostonian Society, the Office of Senate Curator at the U.S. Capitol, and the AFL-CIO's Meany Archives and Museum. She co-founded the Boston Area Collections Coalition, a networking and resource-sharing group for local collections

professionals. In 2010 she was a Fulbright Scholar in Helsinki, Finland, researching best practices for city museums. Other than urban history, her professional interests include museum mapping projects, sensory history, and creativity in museums. She holds a B.A. in urban studies from Haverford College and an M.A. in museum studies from The George Washington University.

J. Rainey Tisdale
41 Amherst Street
Boston, MA 02131
USA

Tel: +1-617-835-0244

E-mail: raineytisdale@gmail.com