

SEEKING NUMINOUS EXPERIENCES IN THE UNREMEMBERED PAST¹

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While increasing numbers of people are visiting historical sites and museums, the reasons for those visits are not well understood. An exploratory survey concerning what Americans want from their visits to such sites discovered that many tourists are motivated by more than information- or pleasure-seeking. Some indicated a quest for a deeper experience at heritage sites and a desire to make a personal connection with the people and spirit of earlier times. This impulse, termed “numen-seeking,” is a strong motivation for many who visit historical sites. (Heritage tourism, numen, visitor motivation, visitor experience)

Historical sites and museums in both North America and Europe have become increasingly popular visitor destinations over the past decades, a fact prompting the observation that history has become a booming industry (Jakle 1985; Kammen 1991; Lowenthal 1985; and Mooney-Melville 1991). The return to the past is also evidenced by heritage movements and collecting. Samuel (1994) describes the rise of the heritage movement in the United Kingdom, based on varieties of collecting, historical re-enactment, and retro-fashion house design and furnishing. Horwitz (1998) documents the growing numbers of Civil War enthusiasts in the United States who dedicate time and resources to battle re-enactments. Gatewood (1990) notes the proliferation of collectors of memorabilia who stockpile old records, comic books, and baseball cards. Gillis (1994:15-18) characterizes Americans and Europeans as “compulsive consumers of the past” who save everything because they are not sure what to save.

Ironically, the interest in, or possibly mania for, history does not parallel knowledge of it. Alderson and Low (1996:23) report that visitors are poorly educated about historical sites: “Visitors at today’s sites no longer come with as much—or, sometimes, with any—historical knowledge.” Falk and Dierking (1992) and Prentice (1993) cite studies that indicate that museum-goers have poor or uneven recall of what they have seen in exhibits. Jakle (1985), Kammen (1991), and Lowenthal (1985) provide further confirmation of this, citing research that demonstrates the sorry state of the public’s knowledge of history. Given that so many visitors know so little of history, why they are such avid consumers of the past, especially when it comes to trips to museums and heritage sites, is puzzling. What is the draw of history?

Generally speaking, museum professionals know relatively little about people’s motivations for visiting historical sites and museums. While marketing surveys are

routinely done by the big museum corporations, they are, with some exceptions,² demographic assessments that describe visitors in terms of their residence, age, sex, occupation, and income rather than motivational or psychographic profiles. Although probing interest in historical sites is clearly in the interest of many organizations, it is not routinely done, perhaps because of the expense for financially strapped institutions, or because many museologists are not trained to do social research.

Nonetheless, historians and museum professionals have theories about visitors' interests and motivations. These appear to be based on subjective impressions rather than empirical research. Several theories are reiterated: nostalgia for a presumed simpler time, a search for cultural or ethnic roots, and anxiety about the future (Alderson and Low 1996; Dickinson 1996; Kammen 1991; Samuel 1994). A concern with cultural identity has been especially salient for Americans, according to Jakle (1985) and Mooney-Melvin (1991). Kammen (1991) dates the emergence of nostalgia to the decades following World War II, suggesting it was fueled by fears about national security and freedom, and a profound sense of cultural discontinuity. By the 1970s, the nostalgia craze was booming, as marked by an increase in the number of museums and a mania for collecting objects of all sorts.

Some of the literature in heritage tourism has begun to examine visitor motivations and experiences. Jansen-Verbeke and van Rekon (1996) suggest that the motivations of cultural tourists are poorly understood and offer a correction to this lacuna with research on visitors to an art museum in Rotterdam. They consider learning and enrichment as the most important among several core motives. Cameron and Gatewood (1994) propose that nostalgia is a driving force behind visitors to a small American city known for its Christmas tourism program.

Much of the recent heritage tourism research draws on social-psychological models of affective and cognitive needs (Crick-Furman and Prentice 2000; Crompton and McKay 1997; Gnoth 1997; Goosens 2000; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Prentice, Witt, and Hamer 1998; Todd 1999; Vittersø et al. 2000). These authors variously discuss the push-pull factors in destination choice, social values associated with certain types of tourism, assessments of benefits gained from travel, and levels of satisfaction with different kinds of sites. Prentice (1993) and McIntosh and Prentice (1999) call for greater attention to people's motivation for visiting heritage sites and their subsequent experience at those sites.

The study presented here is based on exploratory research about what visitors seek at historical sites and museums. The question of whether there are motivations beyond the usual ones—wanting information, socializing, escapism, fun, and relaxation—appears to be answered in the affirmative. One of the important findings is that forays into the past have a strong affective component that has not been well documented in the heritage-tourism literature. Time travel may function a little like foreign travel in that some people wish to make a more personal and emotional connection with a time/place. This possibility was adumbrated some time ago by MacCannell (1976:3) when he suggested that tourists can find authenticity and genuine experiences not only in other cultures, but also other historical periods.

The main finding of our survey pertains to the desire by some people to transcend the present and engage with the past in a highly personal way. This desire for an affective connection with an earlier time is termed "numen-seeking." Numen, in its Latin etymology, translates as a nod or beckoning from the gods. Its first modern usage is in the work of Rudolf Otto (1946 [1928]), a religious philosopher, who describes it as a religious emotion or experience awakened in the presence of something holy. It is used here as a component of an individual's experience at a historical site or museum. Some people make a personal connection with a site that may be manifest as a deep engagement, empathy, or spiritual communion with the people or events of the past. To the extent that making such connections is a motivation for heritage tourism, very likely coexisting with other interests, needs, and desires, the numen impulse needs to be taken into account in the public crafting of historical sites and museums.

SURVEY SITE AND FINDINGS

The survey was conducted in the historic downtown area of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a city of 70,000 people located about 80 miles west of New York City and 50 miles north of Philadelphia. Bethlehem is synonymous with the company that bears its name, the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, the second-largest producer of steel in the United States. The company dominated the city's economy until the domestic steel crisis that began in the late 1970s. After about twenty years of industrial downsizing, the production of steel in the home plant drew to a close in 1996.

The steel company has committed itself to a massive reuse of its plant site. The plan includes a high-technology industrial park, a large train/truck depot, and a museum and recreational complex known as the Bethlehem Works. The museum, called the National Museum of Industrial History, is associated with the Smithsonian Institution Museum through the latter's Affiliates Program. The museum is expected to open in the next three to five years, although the company is currently experiencing serious financial woes (see Cameron 1999 for a full account).

Bethlehem draws many visitors interested in cultural and heritage tourism. The tourism program includes a variety of festival events and historical attractions which bring thousands of visitors annually to the city (Cameron 1987, 1989, 1991; Cameron and Gatewood 1994). The downtown area, with its quaint shops, museums, restored buildings, and adjacent colonial sector, emits an ambience of gentility and history. Tourists and locals alike amble in a leisurely fashion along the streets, making it an ideal location to explore what people say they want from their visits to historical sites and museums. For this reason, it was deemed a useful site for this research.

Interviewers intercepted 255 informants on the street or as they left museums. Local residents as well as visitors were included in the sample. Although respondents were not known beforehand or selected by any personal criteria, technically they comprise a convenience sample rather than a true probability sample (Babbie 1995).

The survey form was a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions that assessed people's interest in historical sites; e.g., the time period and type of site, the importance of certain features such as signs, guided tours, costumed actors, and the like. One open-ended question asked people to describe what might enhance their experience at historical sites, and another asked what they seek to get from such visits. These two questions in particular helped to determine what was important to visitors and whether people sought more than just information and entertainment from their outings.

Interest in History

Table 1 summarizes the findings according to: 1) general interest in and likelihood of visiting historical sites, 2) interest in different kinds of sites, and 3) what features people deem important at historical sites.

The survey confirms what other research has found (e.g., Falk and Dierking 1992); namely, that people are quite interested in history and heritage, and while traveling, are likely to visit a historical site or museum. Among those who had a time-period preference, American colonial history was the most frequently mentioned, a finding confirmed by subsequent ratings of interest in types of sites. Native American sites and homes of famous people were the next preferences.

The preference for colonial sites is not surprising given the popularity of such U.S. destinations as Colonial Williamsburg, Historic Deerfield, Jefferson's Monticello estate, and Mount Vernon. If nostalgia is the driving force of our times, the appeal of colonial sites is easy to understand, for they represent the most distant period in the country's history (although not the history of the continent) and thus a remote time. That period is also characterized by what many people find missing in contemporary life: human-scale communities, artisanal ("real") work, and people connected to one another and to nature.

Of the eight kinds of sites asked about, heavy industrial sites were the least preferred. One reason for this may be that such sites suffer from a recency effect insofar as the functioning industry is well within people's memory. For many, it may be difficult to be nostalgic about a work or occupational culture—coal mining, steel making, automobile manufacture—that is barely deceased or, in some cases, still in operation. Given this recency, perhaps these locales do not yet qualify as "heritage sites." In addition, those who were involved in the industry are likely to feel bitter or angry about the unceremonious end of their livelihood. For others not involved in such work, these industries may not be appealing as places to visit for their size and scale, grit, and ostensible absence of the human element, a point also made by Edwards and Llurdés i Coit (1996) about industrial heritage sites in Wales and Spain.

Table 1: Fifteen Historical-Interest Variables

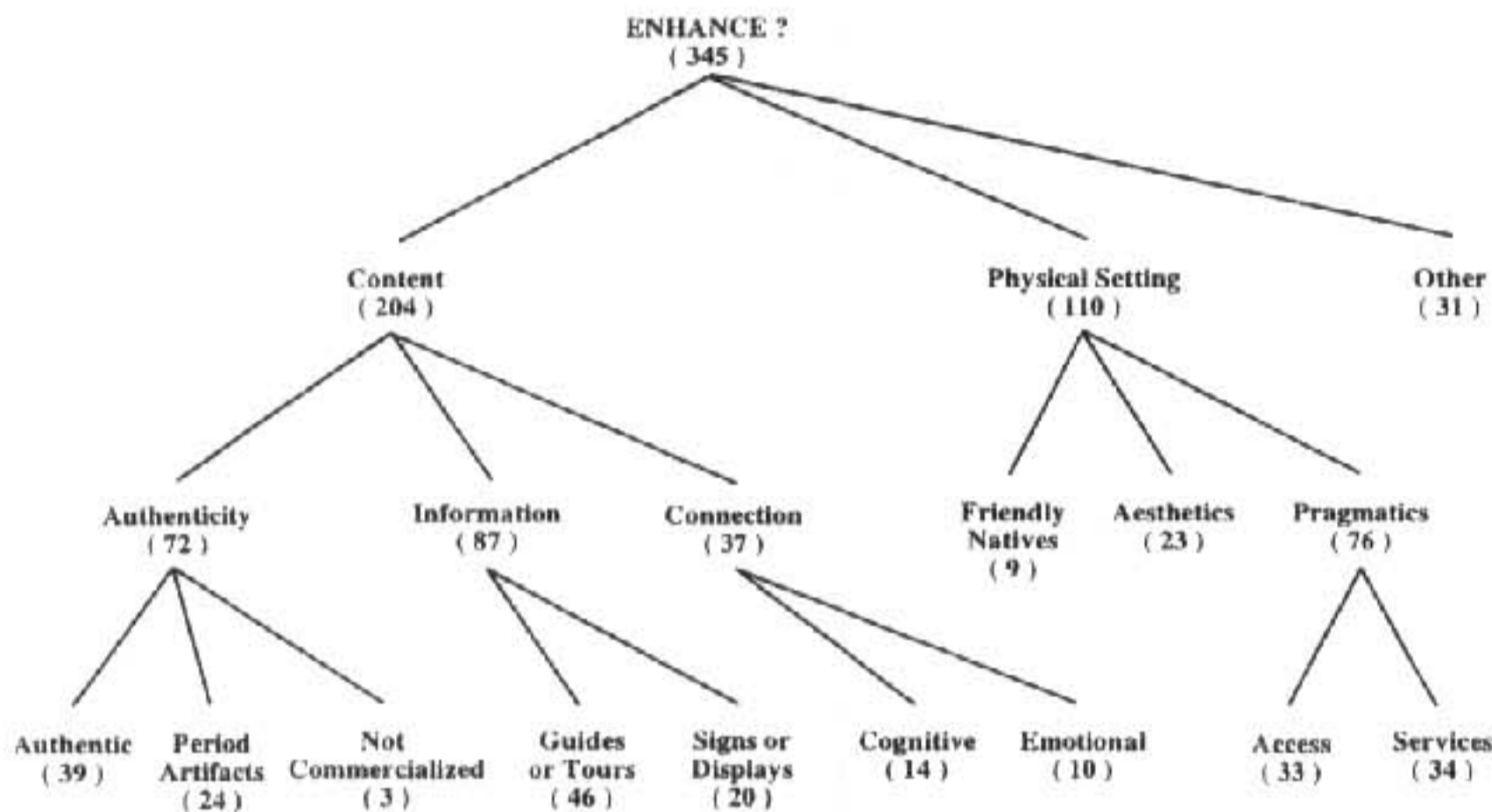
A. General Interest in Historical Sites/Museums	Very Interested 3	Somewhat Interested 2	Not Very Interested 1	Mean
Interest in visiting sites/museums	157	79	19	2.541
Likely to visit sites/museums while traveling	171	56	28	2.561
B. Interest in Specific Types of Sites	Very Interested 3	Somewhat Interested 2	Not Very Interested 1	Mean
Colonial sites	163	73	19	2.565
Native American sites	126	97	32	2.369
Homes of famous people	130	88	37	2.365
Early industrial sites	97	96	62	2.137
Military/political sites	85	112	58	2.106
Heavy industrial sites	56	83	116	1.765
C. Essential Features of Historical Sites/Museums	Very Important 3	Somewhat Important 2	Not Very Important 1	Mean
Explanatory signs	204	41	10	2.761
Hands-on/working displays	119	97	39	2.314
Costumed actors	119	87	49	2.275
Guided tours	119	86	50	2.271
Life-size displays (diorama)	108	105	42	2.259
Large, colorful displays	105	96	54	2.200
Audio recordings	59	108	88	1.886

Preferred Features at a Site

The first of two open-ended questions asked people to identify what things might enhance a visit to a historical site. A content analysis of their responses grouped them into a taxonomy called “Enhance” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Enhance Taxonomy

“Is there anything that makes a historical site particularly enjoyable for you?”



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate coded responses; i.e., 255 respondents produced 345 responses. Not all responses could be coded at lower levels of the taxonomy.

People often referred to two or three different enhancements (e.g., freedom to walk around, accessibility of location and hours, and knowledgeable tour guides), so that there are 345 coded responses from 255 individuals. Also, while most responses were sufficiently detailed to permit coding at terminal levels in the taxonomy, several responses were either so succinct or so idiosyncratic that they had to be coded at more general midlevels. This is the case for the Authenticity node, for example, where six responses could not be coded more specifically.

At the most general level, the responses formed three categories: Content at the site; the Physical Setting; and a residual Other category that included “no/nothing” and other unusual responses.

The Content replies were further divided into those that stressed the importance of authenticity or accuracy, an informative presentation or interpretation, and an individual’s ability to make some kind of personal connection, either emotional or cognitive. Specific aspects of informativeness were knowledgeable guides/good tours

and good signs/displays. Under Authenticity, people said they wanted “authentic presentation.” They also said they liked sites that were not commercialized and contained period furnishings and costumed actors. The Connection idea was sometimes expressed personally, as in, “If I had some kind of connection, like a family member,” and sometimes in terms of prior knowledge, as in, “If I know ahead of time what it’s about.”

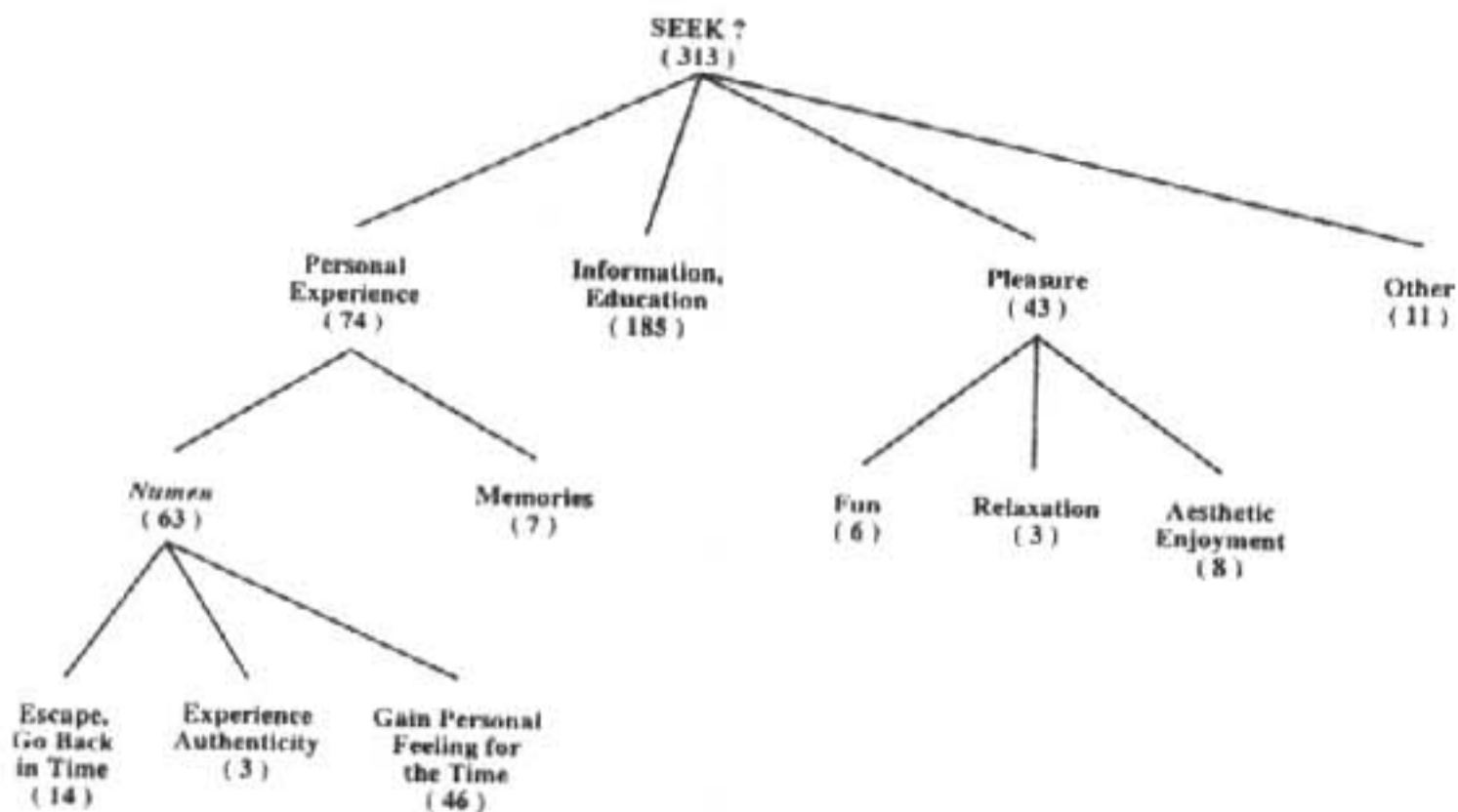
Among those references to the Physical Aspects of the site, the majority of people indicated the importance of access, both physical and temporal, and amenities such as shops, restaurants, restrooms, and general cleanliness. The other references were to aesthetic features (beautiful grounds and art objects) and friendly people, meaning guides and/or natives. This confirms what others have found (e.g., Bronikowski 1998): the importance of easy physical and temporal access to sites and the full complement of physical amenities; i.e., restaurants, seating, clean restrooms, air conditioning, and the like. People also wanted sites that are easy to negotiate with the help of good signage and knowledgeable tour guides. Interactivity was rated highly: respondents said they want “hands-on” displays and role-playing actors.

Desired Experience

The second open-ended question asked people what they seek from their visits to historical sites. The 255 individuals in the sample produced 313 coded responses (see Figure 2). Most responses were sufficiently detailed to permit coding at terminal levels in the taxonomy, but again, some responses could only be coded at more general midlevels, as for example, Personal Experience, where the sum of the lower nodes is less than 74.

Figure 2: Seek Taxonomy

“What do you want to get out of your visits to historic sites or museums?”



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate coded responses; i.e., 255 respondents produced 313 responses. Not all responses could be coded at lower levels of the taxonomy.

The three categories of responses pertain to the desire for Personal Experience, Information, and Pleasure. The Information-Seeking comments were often simply "increased knowledge," "learn about the history," or "education." The Pleasure-Seeking comments mentioned the desire for fun, relaxation, or aesthetic appreciation; for example, "I just want to enjoy the day," or "Just the pleasure of looking at things."

Seventy of the 74 Personal Experience responses allowed finer discriminations to be made into a node called Numen and another called Memories. It seemed appropriate to distinguish between those who see visits primarily as a way to create memories (e.g., "To leave with lasting memories") from those who expressed the idea of a personal connection with people or place.

The Numen desire was expressed in slightly different ways. One response category involved going back in time or an escape; e.g., "I like to feel that for a short time you return to an era that's no longer there," or "[I want to take] a mental sabbatical into the past." A second made reference to authenticity once again; e.g., "I want to see the real thing, no reconstructions." The third response category stressed the importance of gaining information, but in a deeper, insightful way, using expressions such as "appreciation of" or "feel for"; as in, "get a feel for that time." Some of the best examples of this turn of mind are as follows:

To be able to develop a feel of the experience of the people of that time, what they were thinking, what their reality was. . . .

. . . a feeling of the place, a way to connect with what was. . . .

To be able to make a connection with the events that took place in a specific time period. . . .

Just to get a feel for that time, something that is memorable. I like to reflect and remember it. To be part of it.

A parenthesis from normal life. A better understanding of the time period.

A feeling of the times they are showing you. The mindset of the people of that time.

I want to feel the aura of the period, gain a sense of connectedness with the way people lived. I want to have used my mind to experience it, not just the externals.

Statistical Analyses

Given the relatively high frequency with which numenesque comments appeared in the open-ended questions, several analyses were conducted to determine whether there were demographic or attitudinal characteristics that correlate with numen-seeking.

Toward this end, the first step was to explore, through data-reduction techniques, correlations among the various historical interest variables; i.e., the fifteen items appearing in Table 1. Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation

revealed three orthogonal factors. That is, the correlations among the fifteen closed-ended questions can be explained reasonably well in terms of three mutually independent, underlying dimensions. The relationships among these underlying dimensions, or factors, and the original items are indicated by the items' factor loadings (see Table 2), which can be interpreted rather like correlation coefficients. Given the items that load highly on it, the first factor is something like a general interest in history. The second factor involves the interactional potential of sites, and the third factor might be called appeal of the military-industrial complex.

Table 2: Factor Loadings of Historical Interest Items

Fifteen Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Interest in visiting sites/museums	.83	.04	.24
Likely to visit sites/museums	.81	-.12	.15
Interest in colonial sites	.60	.19	.13
Interest in Native American sites	.55	.10	-.01
Importance of explanatory signs	.32	.16	.29
Importance of costumed actors	.17	.70	-.12
Importance of large, colorful displays	.02	.67	.16
Importance of guided tours	.01	.63	.01
Importance of life-size displays	.08	.59	.19
Importance of hands-on displays	.11	.55	-.02
Importance of audio recordings	-.05	.46	.29
Interest in homes of famous people	.40	.46	-.16
Interest in heavy industrial sites	-.03	.00	.85
Interest in early industrial sites	.19	.06	.75
Interest in military/political sites	.25	.06	.48
Eigenvalues:	3.371	1.981	1.463
Variance Explained:	22.5%	13.2%	9.8%

Next, one way analysis of variance was used to determine whether demographic groupings are associated with respondents' factor scores on the three historical interest factors. Neither home residence, educational level, household income, nor age groupings show a significant association with the three dimensions of historical interest. Sex, however, is related to all three factors: weakly with Factor 1, but fairly strongly with Factor 2 and Factor 3 (see Table 3). As a group, women score higher than men on the "general interest in history" factor and substantially higher on the "interactional potential" factor. Conversely, men score higher than women on the "appeal of the military-industrial complex" factor.

Table 3: Historical Interest Factor Scores by Demographic Variables
(F-ratio probability and, if significant, estimated ω^2)

	Residence	Education	Income	Age	Sex
Factor Score 1: General Interest in History	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	(.021) 1.7%
Factor Score 2: Interactional Potential of Sites	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	(.000) 12.5%
Factor Score 3: Appeal of Military-Industrial Complex	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	n.s. —	(.000) 13.1%

Table 4: Comparisons of Numen-Seekers with All Others in the Sample

	Means for Numen-Seekers (n=70)	Means for All Others (n=185)	F-probability/ Est. ω^2
Demographics:			
Residence (coded 1-2)	1.37	1.36	n.s./—
Education (coded 1-4)	3.01	2.72	n.s. (.058)/—
Income (coded 1-7)	4.48	4.58	n.s./—
Age (coded 2-6)	3.94	3.91	n.s./—
Sex (coded 1-2)	1.57	1.58	n.s./—
Historical Interests:			
Factor Score 1	.2653	-.1004	(.009)*/2.3%
Factor Score 2	-.0476	.0180	n.s./—
Factor Score 3	-.0274	.0104	n.s./—

*significant at $p \leq .05$, two-tailed.

Lastly, the 70 individuals who produced the 74 Personal Experience comments in Figure 2 were compared to all 185 other respondents (see Table 4). Although the numen-seekers are slightly more educated than the rest, analysis of variance shows no significant group-group differences on any of the five demographic variables (residence, education, income, age, or sex). Comparing the same two groups in terms of the three historical interest factors, the numen-seekers score significantly higher on the "general interest in history" dimension, but do not contrast with other respondents on the second and third factors.

In summary, about 27 per cent of the respondents in a sidewalk-intercept survey made at least one codable statement indicating that they seek some sort of meaningful personal connection as part of their visits to historical sites and museums. This numen-seeking motive (dichotomously measured based on responses to open-ended questions) is positively related to general interest in history, but it is not related to the specific nature of the site, to techniques of presentation, or to any obvious demographic characteristic. Thus, numen-seeking appears to be a turn of mind or aspect of one's personality that is independent of sex, age, education, income, or residence.

The fact that numen-seeking is not associated with these variables in the Bethlehem survey is somewhat puzzling. It is possible that improved quantitative measures of numen-seeking may bring to light social or behavioral correlates, in which case the absence of significant correlations in the Bethlehem survey might be due to the crudeness of the qualitative measure. Preliminary findings from another study, however, in which a composite index of fixed-response items was used to assess numen-seeking, also found no correlations with age, sex, education, or income (Gatewood and Cameron 2000). Clearly, this general line of inquiry into the correlates of numen-seeking should continue, but possible correlates should be broadened to include biographic and psychographic variables. Similarly, it would be interesting to determine empirically the extent to which numen-seeking is independent of other visitor motives, such as information-seeking, fun-seeking, and authenticity-seeking.

Generalizing the Findings

Because the sample was not randomly drawn from a finite list of potential respondents, it is difficult to say how the findings can be generalized. Respondents were randomly drawn from people walking the streets of downtown Bethlehem during the research period; hence, the sample is representative of that population there and then. But what is that population? What are its defining characteristics, other than physical presence in Bethlehem during the summer? Such questions of generalizability are a common disadvantage of exploratory research, and sometimes of nonexploratory research as well (e.g., Crick-Furman and Prentice 2000:79).

What can be said with some certainty is that the out-of-town visitors are virtually the same on a variety of measures as respondents who live in Bethlehem year round.

That is, if local and nonlocal residents are compared with respect to their demographic, historical interest, and numen-seeking characteristics, they show no significant differences except with respect to their level of education (see Table 5). These remarkable similarities between locals and nonlocals in the sample suggest that the survey findings may well extend beyond Bethlehem.

Table 5: Comparisons of Locals and Nonlocals in the Sample

	Locals (n=163)	Nonlocals (n=92)	Probability and Test
Demographics:			
Education (coded 1-4)	mean=2.65	mean=3.05	(.006)* ANOVA
Income (coded 1-7)	mean=4.42	mean=4.79	(.220) ANOVA
Age (coded 2-6)	mean=3.87	mean=4.00	(.472) ANOVA
Sex (coded 1-2)	mean=1.61	mean=1.52	(.145) ANOVA
Historical Interests:			
Factor Score 1	mean=.0067	mean=-.0119	(.887) ANOVA
Factor Score 2	mean=.0072	mean=-.0127	(.879) ANOVA
Factor Score 3	mean=.0238	mean=-.0422	(.614) ANOVA
Numen-Seekers:			(.943) Chi-
Proportion of Subgroup	44 of 163 (27.0%)	26 of 92 (28.3%)	square

*significant at $p \leq .05$, two-tailed.

THE NUMEN CONCEPT EXAMINED

As best can be determined, the numen impulse has not been empirically investigated before, although there are conceptual references to it, especially in the field of religious studies (Eliade 1967; Otto 1946). Anthropologist Alondra Oubré (1997) explores the evolution of the numinous mind in prehistory and asserts that the capacity to mediate between self and others, time and space, is what sets humans apart from other higher primates. As for whether all people are capable of numinous awareness, she suggests that the capacity lies latent within all people, only waiting to be awakened (Oubré 1997:7). Some confirmation of this comes from a study of war-grave pilgrimage. Walter (1993:72) has documented the unexpected responses of those who go to war cemeteries as tourists only to find when they get there that "for a few moments they have ceased to be tourists and have connected with something very deep."

In the field of public history, Maines and Glynn (1993) use the term numinous to refer to personal objects or places (such as battlefields) which have strong affective

associations. These associations can be real or imagined. Although the objects or places are usually esoteric to the individual, the authors allow that sometimes there are collective associations. Numen can endow places and objects with a “special sociocultural magic” and inspire reactions of reverence and awe (Maines and Glynn 1993:10).

Despite not mentioning numen, Kurin (1997) provides a vivid example of the power of objects to awaken a numinous response. He documents visitors’ responses to “America’s Smithsonian,” a two-year, twelve-city touring exhibition developed by the museum to bring three hundred of the nation’s “treasures” to the public. The exhibition presented an eclectic mix of items (e.g., Abraham Lincoln’s hat, Dorothy’s ruby slippers from the *Wizard of Oz*, an Apollo spacecraft, paintings by notable American and European artists) in the decidedly unmuseum-like setting of convention halls in each city. Apparently, that setting allowed people to focus upon the objects in deeply emotional ways. Quoting from a newspaper article about opening day in Los Angeles, Kurin (1997:38) describes one woman’s reaction to the Rembrandt Peale painting of George Washington. Though she had seen countless reproductions of the painting, she was struck by the power of the real thing, uttering, “He looks so noble. Serene. This is—oh. . . . It’s holy, it’s holy.” He quotes a man viewing Lincoln artifacts as saying, “To see the things that Abe Lincoln wrote, to be close to something that is woven into the fabric of our history—it goes beyond words.” These reactions were not unique; Kurin (1997:38) records that numerous times staff found visitors crying in front of cases, obviously moved. In his evaluation of the tour, he concludes that the exhibition demonstrated “the *power* of the experience that allows visitors to commune with objects, and the ability of an object to convey value by virtue of its exhibit location.”

Obviously, some sites and exhibits may be more successful than others at inducing a numinous response. Places that focus on human suffering and sacrifice are most likely to foster a strong affective response. Historical and museum sites recalling the Holocaust, American Civil War, and war cemeteries for those killed in World Wars I and II are what might be called “high numen” locations with the potential to induce strong emotional reactions.³ Bruner (1994:399), writing about New Salem, Illinois, the town where Abraham Lincoln spent his formative years, describes it as a “national shrine” and provides some vivid examples of how the place evokes a strong response in visitors.

Examples such as these are the kind of sites where the further study of numen-seeking and numinous responses would probably yield rich results. Based on the results of this exploratory survey, there are three aspects of the numen impulse that might be used as quantitative measures in future research: 1) deep engagement and/or transcendence (losing the sense of time passing, intense concentration, feeling mentally transported, and flow,⁴ in the sense suggested by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi [1988]); 2) empathy (imagining earlier people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences, imagining hardships and suffering, and a feel for the time); 3) awe or reverence (being on hallowed ground, spiritual communion with objects, a feeling

of being on a pilgrimage and in the presence of something holy). In fact, these conceptual dimensions underlie a numen-index that has recently been field tested.⁵

THE NUMEN IMPULSE AND REMEMBRANCE OF HISTORY

This article began with the paradox that the public is increasingly interested in history, yet remarkably ignorant of historical facts. Kammen (1991:666–67) notes that

Americans remember prominent people even though they cannot supply the dates, let's say, of their tenure as president. . . . The lay person's memory tends to be people-oriented, impressionistic, and imprecise. . . . History is not a chronology for ordinary folk. It involves a sense of memorable individuals, of pivotal events that caused permanent alterations in a community. . . .

The knowledge problem is most keenly felt by professional historians and curators whose mission is public education. The questions they face are 1) whether heritage sites and museums can pick up where history lessons leave off, and 2) whether an impulse such as numen-seeking might aid in the mission of public education.

These issues are further complicated by the fact that most people simply do not want a classroom-style history lesson. The majority of people regard historical sites and museums as informal educational settings (Falk and Dierking 1992:ch. 7). While visitors may anticipate learning something, they want the experience to be interesting and entertaining. For example, in a study for the Smithsonian Institution, Korn and Associates (1997) found that respondents wanted an experience different from school, one that is experiential and interactive. The desire was verbalized as: "You can be told everything, but it becomes a whole new experience if there are things you can see, touch, and feel, [and] really get an idea of how the conditions were, what they wore, what they ate, or what they used. That really helps" (Korn and Associates 1997:5).

McIntosh and Prentice (1999:608), in their study of people's expectations at three heritage sites in Britain, make a similar point: "Cultural heritage settings were appreciated most for the personal, familiar, or affective responses generated from the attainment of insight." Visitors said they valued the human side of history where they could think deeply about and/or imagine the lives of nineteenth-century people and, in some cases, recall their own memories of earlier times.

Most people want a history tailored to their interests, not to what professional historians and curators think they need.⁶ The history that seems to work, that nurtures a deep involvement, is either that with which an individual has a personal connection, what Timothy (1997) terms "personal heritage," or that which affords deep insight, empathy, or connection into the past in the way this study has suggested. As Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) found in their survey of more than 1,800 Americans, the history that people like best is that with a personal connection to their family and/or ethnic past.

People's learning proclivities present a serious challenge to those who craft sites and exhibits. If people do not enjoy didactic displays, if they do not remember what they encounter, then should the effort to educate the public be abandoned as the mission of public history? Should sites push an emotional button, focusing the personal or inner lives of historical figures and actors? Should they sanitize the past and opt for fun and entertainment, engaging in what Silberman (1997) calls the "Disneyfication" of history?

Site designers need to keep in mind that the public's short-term recall of information is poor and long-term recall may simply be a memory of feelings or sensations such as smells, heat, cold, or hunger (Falk and Dierking 1992:ch. 8). The best sites should aim to induce insight, stir curiosity, or fire the imagination. Nuryanti (1996:253) even recommends that heritage interpretation use a variety of media, methods, and materials to move into "the realms of spiritual truth, emotional response, deeper meaning and understanding."

The numen impulse documented in this study suggests that many people seek an affective involvement with heritage sites. Sites crafted around this impulse will no doubt increase visitors' excitement and enthusiasm about history. Those that are successful in doing so are likely to induce visitors to use discretionary time to attend other heritage attractions and perhaps to learn more on their own later.

NOTES

1. The authors thank Cedar Crest College for a faculty development grant and two undergraduate students, Patricia Marnien and Jennifer Hunt, for administering the survey. They also thank the late Jerry Bastoni (Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor) for clarification of how public historians understand the concept of numen.
2. Steven Lubar, a public historian at the Smithsonian Institution, reports that the museum has an in-house Institutional Studies office that conducts research on visitor preferences and experiences (pers. comm.). Handler and Gable (1997) report that Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., has research, marketing, and advertising divisions.
3. Illustrating the powerful effect of battlefields, 20,000 men and an even larger number of spectators assembled at Gettysburg as part of the sixteenth annual Gettysburg Civil War Heritage Days to re-enact some of the major battles. Newspaper reports suggested that it was a deeply emotional experience for many of the "soldiers." One man who had purchased an actual drum used in a battle declared that he believed his own great-great-grandfather heard the beat of that drum and "that some strange force of history called him to visit that spot [where his great-great-grandfather fell]" (Morning-Call [Bethlehem, PA], July 5, 1998, A2).
4. The flow experience is associated with the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988). Turner (1979:ch. 3) discusses the idea of flow in relation to pilgrimage. Prentice, Witt, and Hamer (1998) identify the flow experience as one of five potential experiences that heritage tourists can have. See also Falk and Dierking (1992:ch. 7).
5. The numen concept has been operationalized in a recent study of visitors to Gettysburg National Military Park (Gatewood and Cameron 2000). The questionnaire included 34 items with a Likert-type response scale ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") covering many different aspects of what people might want or enjoy from a visit to a heritage site, including aspects of information-seeking, fun-seeking, and numen-seeking. In particular, numen-seeking can be measured fairly well by responses to ten items, which have acceptable item-by-index correlations (ranging from $r=.74$ to $r=.55$) and

reasonable interitem correlations (mean item-by-item $r = .343$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .839$). The ten items comprising this Gettysburg Numen-Index are as follows:

- I like to use my mind to go back in time while visiting historic sites and museums.
- I am sometimes able to connect deeply with the objects displayed in exhibits.
- While at historic sites, I try to feel the aura or spirit of earlier times.
- I enjoy reflecting on a site or museum after visiting it.
- I enjoy imagining the day-to-day life of people who lived in the past.
- Some sites and museums provoke an almost "spiritual" response in me.
- When I was a child, I used to imagine what it would have been like to live in the past.
- At some historic sites and museums, I lose my sense of time passing.
- I want to learn about the hardships of earlier times, not just the high points.
- I enjoy talking about my personal reactions to historic sites and museums.

6. An exception to this rule is the so-called hard-core re-enactors of Civil War events who have committed even the smallest details of battles to memory and who, on their weekend getaways, engage in faithful re-enactments. Tony Horwitz (1998), a journalist who followed the hard-cores, chronicles their insistence on authenticity in the form of uniforms, food, and supplies. Many of them stringently diet to create the rail-thin bodies that were typical of Confederate soldiers.

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