

Presentation at the Opening of the Jencks Education Center & Community Guild Studio, Slater Mill Historic Site

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It's always a pleasure to visit Slater Mill – a pleasure and a challenge. It's a pleasure because it's a remarkable site, remarkably preserved. It's a historical site of unquestionable historical importance. It's important on a national level – things happened here that changed the course of American history. It's important on a regional level – what Slater did here shaped Rhode Island's economy for a century. And as important, it's important on a personal, a family level – over 150 years, thousands of people worked here, hundreds of thousands worked in the mills that were based on the Slater Mill model.

And it's a pleasure to be here not just as a historian, but also as a lover of museums and historic sites. Slater Mill has been a historic site for 80 years - a historical site that has seen generations of careful preservation, and of imaginative interpretation.

And that's the challenge, too. Those generations of careful preservation and imaginative interpretation have each responded to their time, their generations' needs. In the 1920s, it was a story of the triumph of industrialism. In the 1970s, it was a story of the technological prowess. The challenge is: what the story that Slater Mill tells us today? Sites like Slater Mill speak to us about things that are important to us today, but it's not always easy to hear them. It takes imaginative directors and curators to interpret the voice of the site, to help us learn from the past as we look to the future.

And Slater Mill has important things to tell us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Slater Mill's history is, after all, is a story of immigration, globalization, rapid technological change, environmental challenges – issues that might be, as they say, “ripped from the headlines.” We are facing the same issues that Slater and his workers, and two hundred years of entrepreneurs and industrialists and engineers and workers have faced, and we can learn from their experiences. We can learn about the complexity of the issues we face, about our challenges, and we can learn that we can overcome these challenges.

But it's more than that, more than about policy and politics and business – we can also find in Slater and his workers, and in the generations of businesspeople and working people since them, something about the skills and achievements and satisfactions of artisans, and craftspeople. For while we tend to think of Slater when we think about this site, he was one person among many. He brought skills to the site – so did every one of the workers, as well. When we preserve and visit Slater mill, we are celebrating not just Slater and his work, but the thousands of men and women who were skilled artisans – machinists, spinners, weavers, machine fixers, dyers, mechanics, -- the list goes on. Historians used to focus on the ways that industrialization “deskilled” workers – but the recent literature does the opposite, focusing on the continuing importance of skills of all sorts in the mill and factory.

And so it is appropriate that we are here today at the dedication of the Jencks Education Center & Community Guild Studio. Education is at the heart of what a museum does, and with the Education Center, there will be space, and collections, to do education well. The Jencks Studio celebrates the skills of craftspeople – appropriate not only to the history of the site, but enormously appropriate to Pawtucket today, with its thriving arts scene.

Slater Mill Historic Site speaks both to the past, and to the present and future. It's a balancing act, for museums, to do that well, and finding the right balance is a key to their success. With the new focus on education and craftspeople, Slater Mill has found the balance that Pawtucket – Rhode Island – and the nation – needs today.

Thank you.