

Transcript of Interview with Robert Shimp by Alex Bice

Interviewee: Robert Shimp

Interviewer: Alex Bice

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Location (Interviewee): Boston, MA

Location (Interviewer): Boston, MA

Transcriber: Holly Barnard

Abstract:

Robert Shimp discusses how the pandemic affected the Paul Revere Memorial Association. He explains the rationale behind the closing and the subsequent reopening of the Revere House to the public. He also recalls how the institution pursued different forms of online content creation, such as its blog and podcast, during the period of time that the House was closed to the public. Shimp also underscores the importance of cultural heritage institutions like the Revere House during the pandemic.

Alex Bice 00:00

Hello, can you hear me?

Robert Shimp 00:01

Yep.

Alex Bice 00:04

Fantastic. We are recording. My name is Alex Bice. I am here with Robert Shimp. The date is August 4, 2020. The time is 10:33am. I'm located in Boston, Massachusetts. Robert, where are you located?

Robert Shimp 00:21

Boston, Massachusetts.

Alex Bice 00:23

Great! I want to briefly review the informed consent and deed of gift document. This interview is for the COVID-19 Oral History Project which is associated with the Journal of the Plague Year, a COVID-19 archive. The COVID-19 Oral History Project is a rapid response oral history focused on archiving the lived experiences of the COVID-19 epidemic. We've designed this project so that professional researchers in the broader public can create and upload their oral histories to our open access and open source database. This study will help us collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19 as well as help us better understand the impacts of the pandemic over time. The recordings, demographic information, and the verbatim transcripts will be deposited in the Journal of the Plague Year COVID-19 archives, and the Indiana University Library System for the use of researchers in the general public. Do you have any questions about the project I can answer?

Robert Shimp 01:17

I do not, no. It seems like a great venture.

Alex Bice 01:21

Great. Taking part in this study is voluntary you may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in the study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University IUPUI or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute. Participating in this project means that your interviews will be transcribed in digital video and or audio formats, the recordings and possible transcriptions of my interviews, copies of any supplementary documents or additional photos that you wish to share. The important consent and deed of gift documents may be deposited in the Journal of the Plague Year, a COVID-19 Archive, and the Indiana University Library System. It will be available to both researchers and the general public. Your name and other means of identification will not be confidential. Do you have any questions?

Robert Shimp 02:16

I do not.

Alex Bice 02:18

Fantastic. Great. So we are good to get started. So just to start out, could you talk a little bit about your background and your current position, the organization you work with, and what your job entails?

Robert Shimp 02:37

Sure, yeah, so my name is Robert Shimp. I am 31 years old. I currently live in Boston, Massachusetts, kind of the suburb –not suburb but neighborhood– of Brighton with my wife, Megan LeBaron. I am originally from the Midwest. So I grew up on a farm in central Illinois, so not too far from Bloomington and Indiana University. I lived there through my entire youth and then went to Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for my undergraduate degrees in broadcast and electronic communications and history. Then following my graduation at Marquette University, I moved out to Boston in 2011. And completed, recently completed, I guess, a couple of years ago now, my PhD in American history at Boston University. So since I've been in Boston, I was concurrently working on my dissertation while also working in public history primarily at Adams National Historical Park. And upon completion of my degree, I was able to secure the position that I'm currently in, which is the research and adult program director for the Paul Revere Memorial Association. So I started that position in literally the start of 2019 January 2 2019. So I've been in that position for about a year and a half now. I conduct various research projects and needs for the Paul Revere Memorial Association, which is primarily initially consisted of the Paul Revere House itself, but now to other historic structures. We continue to produce original content through several mediums, both digitally and print on Paul Revere, the house in north end of Boston, Boston itself, and the various chronological periods in which individuals occupied the house and I run our internship program through which we have excellent outstanding interns, especially one Alec Bice over the spring of 2020. And I conduct various programs that we offer throughout the year, including an annual lecture series in conjunction with the with the Lowell Institute. They also have supervisory duties on site at the houses, we are a public facing institution and have traditionally done very high attendance last year, we did close to 300,000 people coming through the site in the course of the year, though, obviously, those numbers have been, which I'm sure we'll discuss a bit greatly altered

by the current pandemic. So I think that's, Hopefully that's enough of an encapsulation of my background and what I do.

Alex Bice 06:17

Yeah, great. Just what led you to choose museums and cultural heritage as sort of your field.

Robert Shimp 06:25

Yeah, so I think I always had a general interest in history. Growing up in rural Illinois, my family didn't travel a whole lot to different areas. We'd do an annual vacation up in northern Wisconsin, which is probably my favorite place in the world, but we didn't travel to many other varied sites. So I had an opportunity to travel abroad once in high school and very much enjoyed the experience and then ultimately, as an undergrad, one of my cousins lived in Boston, so I traveled frequently, or once a year, to Boston, while an undergrad, and it was through those experiences that I was kind of blown away by the the preservation, the history, the ability to use historic sites and engage with, you know, the public and in various ways, so I added history as a secondary major and I have viewed public history as somewhat of a fusion of my two great interests, which has been communication and broadcast communication with historical research. So I find public history to be a great balance of those two interests and definitely, for me, a more fulfilling way to convey information and interact with the public than strictly staying in academia as a professor or writing content, in some cases, depending on how niche it is that may only connect to, you know, 20s, 30s, of people ever. And there's I do think there's great significance in that as well for kind of the general human experience, documenting history, but I find public history, a way in which you can work in the field and connect to so many more individuals than otherwise you might be able to.

Alex Bice 08:36

Fantastic, thank you so much. So let's sort of go back I guess to what was only I guess, a few months ago, but still feels like forever ago. What was sort of –what do you remember about when the Coronavirus first started entering the news cycle?

Robert Shimp 08:59

Yeah, I think it was –I mean, it was an interesting thing from a work standpoint, because we are such a public facing institution and that we interact with so many people, I think it was it was on our radar from January and February. Though it quite, hadn't quite, entered the United States yet and he had done a trip in mid February, which now with hindsight, was actually pretty great timing that I was able to do a little bit of travel before everything shut down. But I was in Wisconsin, just weeks before everything really went sideways, and my wife was traveling in Cleveland, just after that, so I remember starting to get worried if she'd be able to make it back to Boston, which she was able to without problem, but it was just about the time things started to shut down in early March so I remember at least an institution and in the sense that it was still pretty far away, and then as it became increasingly real that, you know, there were this great uncertainty about the spread and, and how rapidly it could spread. In that week of March that ended –I think we closed on March 12. It seemed like it was just a rapidly developing week of, of anxiety, uncertainty, I remember riding the T, the MBTA, the public transit system in Boston, and seemed very worried about the proximity and the volume that was still on the trains, and I believe our last day that we were open as a site, just looking at the calendar, I think, was March 12, and I still

remember that we were, through March 12, that we still did about 250 people that day. So I mean, it's still a lot, for the time, a lot of people going through, and then ultimately, we made the decision that that afternoon that we'd be closing to the public at the time, I remember, we put a sign up that said through March 31, which obviously was naively optimistic, and wasn't the case at all, but at the time, we, I think, recognize that it was a unique it, was a grave, potentially grave situation, but still had no idea what the, you know, the timeline of it would be.

Alex Bice 11:43

Absolutely. How did the decision to sort of close? How did how did that decision get made? I guess. in the case of the Revere House?

Robert Shimp 11:53

Yeah. So I think our executive director Nina Zannieri is really an exceptional leader in general in the field. And I think it was one of the things that really started to rapidly develop over the course of the day. I mean, I think we were still in the position that we were going to kind of, you know, see where things were, were moving and going, I recall too, I think we had a sense that we probably need to close at some point, but didn't know precisely when it would happen, and at least for me, personally, I'm a big, big sports fan, so I think it was on March 11. I remember watching some of the NBA games, with with the Dallas Mavericks in particular, they announced mid-game that the NBA season was canceled, which I think was the first big like, whoa, this is this is getting very, very serious in terms of what's going to be open, closed, you know, what contours of life in America are going to look like soon. I think that was a big, big, shocking moment, for me at least, and then the next day as it progressed, it seemed like a lot of –as we were in conversations with, and Nina was in conversations with, a lot of our peers and partners, especially along the Freedom Trail, and in Boston, it seemed like everyone was kind of rapidly coming to an accord that we would need to close for an unknown amount of time. So it was a it was a decision that that certainly I mean, we operate as an individual institution, but from where we are in Boston, we have a lot of partner sites and a lot of peers in close proximity that have similar backgrounds and interests and functions, so I think it was one that that we felt good to know that we had the, you know, support of other similar institutions that were making, what was you know, an unprecedented call, I remember Nina reflecting many times in that moment where it was still a very difficult decision to make that you know, we had never really closed as an institution before the Paul Revere Memorial Association has existed for 112 years now, so even, as is the case I think with with everywhere, nothing like this is has really happened before so it was still a very difficult decision to make that felt pretty heavy in the moment but I think ultimately was one that was obviously the the right decisions in terms of concern for for public safety and staff safety and one that was made a little bit easier than the fact that we were in lockstep with almost all of our peer sites in Boston.

Alex Bice 15:05

Gotcha. What did –so as a full time staff member, how did your job and your responsibilities sort of shift with the closing of the site?

Robert Shimp 15:20

Yeah, so we, we closed to the public that Thursday, so that would have been March 12. We went into [the] office the next day, which would have been the 13th, the senior staff members, I don't think all of

us were in, but I was in the next phase, we kind of went in, obviously did deep cleaning, we kind of plotted through the best we could, what next steps would be, and we set a rudimentary schedule for the coming weeks that we still needed to do building checks. We were still under the assumption that it would be safe to at least have a few of us in the office at a given time, but maybe not the full staff. So senior staff consists of seven individuals in total, so I remember I had normal, insofar as you can say it, but a normal weekend that I was off on Saturday and Sunday, and then I would then on Monday, with Nina, our executive director, and Alex, one of our program assistants. So the three of us were in that Monday to do building checks and had a normal day of work, obviously closed to the public. But we're typically closed on Mondays during the slower season. And we did our building checks, we did, you know, some desk work and things like that, and that was really the last time that we were in [the office] with multiple people until late June. So from that point, we went into what became an increasingly reduced schedule of two people in separate buildings, maybe three days a week, and then ultimately, in terms of the physical work on site, it was one staff person on. Ultimately, we got down to twice a week, I believe we were doing Mondays and Thursdays. So we still have three historic structures on site, buildings that date to 1680, at 1711, and 1835 that have their own idiosyncrasies and concerns, so actually, one, I remember one day that I went in, it's useful if we were still doing building checks, this is early in the process that I went in and the real temperature in our office building, which is a historic house, the Hitchborn House, that dates 1711, the real temperature on the first floor was at 90 degrees, which was not ideal at all, so we had to, obviously do an emergency maintenance call and a guy from the HVAC company was able to come in and fix it, but that was obviously a very problematic situation, so we still had the need for those sorts of building checks, but after that, we got down to about once a week, and then once every other week where we were going in and ultimately, in terms of going into the office, it became kind of a fun experience, because my wife would go in as well as, she's working on a PhD and is an adjunct professor at Boston University, so we were able to go in, and obviously we were connected in terms of our level of, potential level of, or actual level of quarantine, and what we do is we live together. So she would go into the office and do her work while I would do building checks, get the mail and go to the bank or whatever we'd have to do institutionally. So that was my work on site. Otherwise, I feel like I stayed quite busy. And it allowed me to almost get back into the process of being a graduate student and doing a lot of the dissertation work that I would do from our apartment and from the kind of workspace that I have here. So it was nice to be able to get back in that sense to to primary source research continuing to work with with yourself and Laura, the interns for 2020. And then in particular pivoting a lot of what we were doing institutionally to new digital content in the form of the Revere Express Blog, which was, and still exists today, is a somewhat condensed version of the quarterly newsletter that we do when we're writing new content pieces on various points of history connected to the Revere House or Boston broadly construed, and somewhere between a thousand or two thousand words and then launching the Revere House Radio Podcast, which has actually been quite successful in something we'd considered for a while, but we were able to utilize the opportunity of the shutdown and having more time off duty, so to speak, not time in the House working with the public, so we were able to use that distance time to produce new content, which I really enjoyed is kind of a fusion of both my interest and background and radio and my work in history. So I think we were able to successfully harness some of the content that we've been kicking around and thinking of, and were able to kind of rapidly get that up to speed and disseminate. And fortunately, we've been able to since we've reopened now, keep that content going and I think it's something as an institution that we're looking forward to, to continue in the future at a reduced rate, we had kind of a high level of production

initially, but now as our time is stretched a little bit differently now, we've scaled back to production, but are still continuing both of those –through both of those sources.

Alex Bice 21:34

Interesting, awesome. In terms of how, in terms of just personally, how did you feel about sort of all of the rapid changes that sort of came as things shifted from, you know, not really, things were open, but people didn't know until a sudden like, I guess, onslaught of news about the Coronavirus in the United States.

Robert Shimp 22:04

Yeah, I mean, I think it was, it was definitely, was definitely challenging. I feel like I especially with the kind of the sports scene in mid –even in February, watching a lot of the European countries and where things are going, I think I had a little bit of a sense of maybe where things were going not to any grand scale. So I think I somewhat processed a bit where the winds were blowing a little bit earlier. And then when things really started to shut down, I mean, it was definitely a shock and realizing that we would need to stay in and be as isolated as possible, I think was a challenge. But I think it's one that really we, personally I think [my wife] Megan and I adapted to, you know, the best we could I think it helps and, you know, I know you recently had a lot of your work in graduate school as well, but I think it was, for us, being able to transition back, at least for me, into that that kind of moment of being a graduate student in which I would kind of sit down at the workspace here and work on you know, from nine to five or otherwise. So I think in terms of our actual like, day to day work and function, I think it's something that we were able to actually kind of balance out and get into a groove you know, relative terms, of course, but with some with some ease. So you know, interacting in public and going to the grocery store and like –especially early just that touching of any surfaces and washing the hands. All of those things were causes of great stress. For sure, but I think we were able to kind of make the best of it as we could. We did do one trip in early May to visit and stay with Megan's mother in Euclid Ohio, just outside of Cleveland, for about a week. So we went straight there we quarantined when we returned. So that was kind of a decision that had some stress attached to it initially and then ultimately was totally fine. But that is something that we felt like we we needed to do and I think ultimately ended up being the you know, the right thing to do as well.

Alex Bice 24:37

In terms of– so obviously I guess Coronavirus hasn't been the only sort of big thing to happen in 2020. The killing of George Floyd and sort of protests related to that were equally sort of a big thing. Did that have any impact on sort of your job or your institution and what you were thinking about as all of that happened and continues to happen?

Robert Shimp 25:08

Yeah, absolutely. I think we had a lot of discussions in the moment around, both around George Floyd and then as protests really began to increase in Boston, I think a lot of institutions did this, I think it felt like we needed to then desire to participate in that in a capacity that made sense to us. So it was something that I'd really sat with for some time, and I took the initiative actually to write an Express post, which ultimately functioned as our kind of our statement for racial justice in the United States. But we wanted to make sure that what we were doing wasn't like a corporate statement or something without

tangible value to it. So ultimately, I was able to write and then drafted –or edited in conjunction with Nina and Emily Holmes, and Adrian Turnbull-Riley, a piece that also connects to one of the few primary sources that we have for Paul Revere, is contextual, anti slavery feelings, and a kind of a terse exchange that he had with one of his former friends from Massachusetts, who was a transplant to the south. So I think institutionally, we wanted to make sure we're being true to who we are and what our mission is. In terms of the statement that we were able to put out, and I think it was, it was fairly well received. But I think the important thing is that the work that we've been doing generally, and one of the things that I've really tried to push for in my time at the Revere House is to continue to make us and the stories that we tell broader than just Paul Revere, and broader than really American history and try to be true to what the site specific history is, whether that be an appointment, a first contact and Native American history in the 17th century, or unveiling the complicated stories of slavery and racial supremacy from from the 17th into the 18th century and continuing within Boston, itself, and generally telling more inclusive stories. I think that's something that we've worked for. That's something that we have continued, and will continue to do so. So I think in some sense, while we do it in a small way, I think our work has stayed true to the point. So the moment didn't feel disingenuous, I think to to us to produce a statement like we did.

Alex Bice 28:13

Right. So to transition more towards, I guess, reopening Could you talk a little bit about how you felt about going back to work personally, as well as I guess the decision making around reopening as a museum in this time?

Robert Shimp 28:35

Yeah, I mean, I think it was one that we put a lot of – a good deal of thought and work into. We had weeks of kind of training and getting the equipment that we needed the PPE that we needed and having the site setup, the best we could for both staff safety and visitor safety. So a lot, a lot, of thought and work went into it from from all the senior staff. I think we all had reservations and trepidations about it, especially in the sense that once we did ultimately open it was a lot of trial and error as we did a soft opening a few weeks ago, so this would be now early or kind of mid July. But we worked within the states limitations we can have essentially seven people at a time on a floor in the house. So our numbers are drastically limited. But I think in terms of the spacing in terms of the mass, I think those are all things that we are doing the best we can and actually feel generally safe and what we're doing and I think importantly definitionally everything that we're doing really does not result in close contact anywhere which can be within six feet and I'm 15 minutes, we've set up the system in a way that no visitor should or does have close contact with any staff person at any point. So that's factoring in both staff safety and visitor safety. So I think no matter what, in this moment in time, everything does have inherent risk. I think everything's still uncertain. I think the the numbers in the nation are are generally not going the way they should, or, or we hope they maybe would be by August. But in terms of what we're doing institutionally, I think we're doing it as safely as possible. And I think that I think that's felt in both myself and the I can only speak for myself, but I think at least in terms of the senior staff, what what we were able to put together over May, June and early July.

Alex Bice 30:59

Right, in terms of –you talked a little bit earlier, sort of about having more time to focus on primary sources and sort of other projects when the site wasn't in operation. Has that sort of changed again, now that the site is moving back towards –or is now accepting visitors again?

Robert Shimp 31:22

Yeah, I think it's been a matter of time, and I think that's something that we recognized would happen when we were doing these things. I think one of Nina's cautions was always make sure that we don't get into a situation in which we are not able to produce any content as soon as we reopen. So it's trying to strategically scale things back. So we were able to, to continue putting out content through this reopening process. So while we were maybe doing three pieces a week, at kind of the peak of the shutdown, we've now reduced to one piece a week, but it's still, I think that's still, meaningful at the moment. So definitely the time has shifted for me at work, in terms of being online as it were a lot more working with the public and having to consider a lot more of the ramifications and daily operations than we had to. So my –the new project time that I had definitely has been decreased, but I think we've built in the structure and in a way that those projects can still continue to so they weren't one off ventures or kind of specific ventures that would die off as we reopen. So I think we've done a good job of trying to find that, that work time balance.

Alex Bice 32:47

Right. Going -looking towards something you mentioned there. I was wondering, what have your –as you've interacted more with visitors since returning to the site, what have those interactions been like overall?

Robert Shimp 33:03

Yeah, it's a good question. It was one I think that I had grief –I wouldn't say grief, but definitely trepidation, and initially that we'd have pushed back on visitors not wanting to wear masks that we have pushed back on visitors not wanting to do the mandated contact tracing that we have visitors that were generally generally flippant about the whole scenario. And I have to say that really has not been the case at all, which has been really gratifying, I would say 95 to 98% of visitors have been totally complaint has been very nice has been on board with everything that we're doing. And I really thought that would be a much lower percentage. So that's been great to see. The only concern is where people are coming from. I'm asking we don't require anyone but just conversational ask visitors, you know, where they're coming from. And we have had so many visiting from parts of the country that are kind of going the wrong way numbers. We've had a lot of Florida we've had a lot from the south, etc. So that's definitely been a concern and thinking about where the numbers of Massachusetts have been, hit hard early and then generally improved. Well, now we're seeing this influx and visitors from potentially problem areas. We'll see the new directives from the governor new travel restrictions that went into play on August 1, we're speaking on August 4, we'll see if those have any effect on where visitors are coming from but that's definitely a better and I would say that's the point of greatest concern since we've reopened.

Alex Bice 34:45

Absolutely. Since reopening have you had more sort of local visitors than you would in a normal summer or has that been –obviously the number of visitors is substantially lower, and we can talk about

that as well, but do you think there's been a greater proportion of local visitors? Or do you think that has stayed about the same just as people are maybe looking for something else to do? Or trying to go to things that they feel safe if they're open?

Robert Shimp 35:20

Yeah, yeah, I would actually, I would say, in my experience, and again, these are all anecdotally, I would say it's a decreased and in fact, I would say it's maybe decreased significantly. I really have not interacted with many local visitors, especially immediately local. I mean, we've had some from different parts of Massachusetts, and New England, but I would say the vast majority that I have interacted with have been from different parts of the country, our international travel, obviously down to zero or about zero. I think that, I really think, and others might have different responses to this, but I think the local attendance has decreased, perhaps even significantly. Our numbers in general, so far, with a couple of weeks under our belt, we're looking at about probably 10 to 15% of my typical attendance, this time of year.

Alex Bice 36:16

Gotcha. And what what how –in terms of just like number of people, what would a normal day during this time look like for the Revere House in your own experience?

Robert Shimp 36:28

Yeah, so I've only had one year under my belt, but typically, definitely over 1000, generally, this time, which would be our busiest year, usually looking at somewhere between 1500 to 2000 people and even on some of the busiest, very busiest days, we're doing over 2000 individuals a day. So maybe 2100 or 2200 was maybe the tops ever. Right now, especially just given how tours need to progress both in time and space wise, last week, we were doing about 150 individuals a day, and then on our busiest day, the last day that I worked, which was last Saturday, we did hit 200 exactly for the first time. So again, somewhere between that 10 to generally 10 to 15%, kind of is a moving target mark.

Alex Bice 37:19

Gotcha. Sort of, related to this, do you think there are specific or unique challenges that historic houses and other sorts of historic sites versus traditional museum are facing during this time?

Robert Shimp 37:37

Absolutely. It's all about space. I think it's just all about the space and the numbers and how you can get people into spaces safely, and allow for distancing, and allow for, you know, circulation and all of those things. I think that's our greatest challenge. And to some extent, actually, all of our numbers I think, are somewhat reduced from what the demand would be because we have had lines out and people have not wanted to wait the time to come in, because it just takes longer to get smaller numbers of individuals through the site in a safe manner. So everyone's distanced, they're distanced from themselves and distanced from the staff members. So I think that's absolutely been our biggest challenge, so far relative to, you know, large museums, say the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston or something to that extent, where you have a lot of built in space, it's not something that we have, so we've had to reformulate kind of our tours that are more guided through stations rather than a typical self guided experience for visitors that have come in. I think it's worked well so far, but that's definitely

been the biggest challenge and trying to think creatively in new ways about the very confined spaces that we just have existing, and there's no way we can change them without altering historic structures.

Alex Bice 39:12

Absolutely. In terms of –speaking a little bit more broadly, I'm wondering, what do you think historic houses are, in general or specific to the Paul Revere House and related sites, what do you think they sort of offer us in this moment?

Robert Shimp 39:30

It's a good question, I think one of the things that we've talked about is certainly a glimpse into lived experiences and previous moments of crisis, whether that be different pandemics, whether that be different outbreaks, whether that be wars, whether that be just kind of personal struggles and tragedy. So I think it's a way to connect to these very human experiences over different periods of time and put our moment into context. So I think that's, important and I think that's significant. I think they –well maybe for some moments of comfort and familiarity and visiting sites and periods of the past that some may, you know, connect to more than others. And I think for some, it allows for a diversionary experience in terms of general tourism and entertainment and the ability to experience fundamentally different views and spaces from daily life. So I think they can work in a few different ways, and I think, especially in this moment of both the pandemic and increased, I think, reckoning in the nation, in the United States for racial justice and awareness and being cognizant of a lot of the past wrongs and problems in the country, I think historic sites can and should be a touchstone for those questions too.

Alex Bice 41:28

Fantastic. As part of sort of talking about what the power of your house and other historic sites offer, I'm wondering specifically, if you have any thoughts about how this will effect [and] impact the Freedom Trail, but just because I feel like a big part of the Paul Revere House is its relationship to the Freedom Trail and the other sorts of sites that exist on that trail?

Robert Shimp 42:08

Yeah, I mean, I think that's a point of great concern. Honestly, I think a lot of places not just on the Freedom Trail, but historic sites in general, are going to be incredibly strapped to just simply survive and exist. I think we're seeing that in a lot of our partner institutions that are already making very tough decisions, financial decisions about what their staffing is going to look like, what their purpose is, how can they continue on. I think, fortunately, and a big credit to our executive director Nina Zannieri, I think we're in an especially relative, very good financial position, compared to a lot of our peers. That doesn't mean that we can't, you know, exist in perpetuity as things go on, but I think we're able to –we have kept all of our staff on through this entire process, which I think is quite unique in terms of, you know, relative to our peers. So I think there is a great concern about the continuation of a lot of our Freedom Trail partner sites, certainly concern for ourselves as well. But in terms of what these partnerships are going to look like, and terms of what sort of, you know, programming will continue to be available along the Freedom Trail. So I think things will probably look, and this is not, you know, prognostic at all, but I think things will look different in one way or another in the coming year and coming years.

Alex Bice 43:43

Great, that's very interesting to hear. I'm sorry, taking a moment to just check through everything I have so far. [long pause] I guess, sort of now looking more towards the future, where do you see things going from here just in terms of your own specific institution, how you see, assuming things which admittedly, there are no longer any safe assumptions I feel like in terms of the Coronavirus, if things feel on, if things remain on this relatively same path, what do you see sort of going forward for your institution?

Robert Shimp 44:46

Yeah, I mean, that's a, it's a tough question. I think we'll continue to, I think, one of the opportunities has been able to produce this content, this new content that we've done that can be evergreen in some sense so we'll have content and continue to produce content that can be used and returned to over –in coming years, which I think is important, given the uncertainty of the period on if, we'd have to close down again, if our numbers will continue to be reduced, you know, those sorts of things. So I think we will anticipate very low visitation for a while coming up, especially before there's a vaccine, and then probably even after there's a vaccine, as people slowly return to the numbers. So I mean, I think ideally, we'd like to be able to get back to the numbers that we were doing, but I think that's probably unrealistic for some time. So it's finding a balance, just in terms of survival, about how to, you know, increase attendance in the best way that you can safely while also trying to find different sources of revenue, and monetize some of the products that send the good content, that we are putting out. So I think it's, as is going to be the case with a lot of places, it's a hybrid ideas of interacting with the public and spaces, but then also trying to harness and utilize this moment to interact with distance learning and digital content, and maybe non traditional spaces of visitation in places that we wouldn't be able to, to reach in, in normal times, and doing all of that within the capacity of our generally pretty small staff size.

Alex Bice 46:44

Understood. Well, those are all of the questions I have. Is there anything else you wish I would have asked in relation to this oral history?

Robert Shimp 46:57

No! I think those cover a lot of it. Again, there's just stating the obvious, but a lot of uncertainty as to where things go, as we're talking right now, in this this moment, early August, I think, I think there's still a great deal of uncertainty as to whether Massachusetts will scale back the opening and the stages that we're in, if we'll continue on, you know, where the numbers for the rest of the country go and things like that. So all of it is so many cliches to this point, but we're really just trying to take it, you know, very slow and almost on a weekly basis to, to see where we're at. And we'll you know, we'll see where things go as, as the month and months progress.

Alex Bice 47:44

Absolutely. Are there any closing thoughts you have about the importance of museums sort of, in this moment, what they can offer to people?

Robert Shimp 47:56

I think I covered a lot of my my general thoughts. It's something that I need to ruminate on more going forward, but I think there is this moment of trying to, generally trying to, to consider where museums fit in and the stories museums are telling, and I think we're going to have –I think there will be a public

reckoning in so many ways as so many businesses see, you know, what, their viability is moving forward. So I think these are, these are big questions that, you know, I feel strongly about for a lot of places, but I think we'll continue to be answered need to be answered in new ways by the general public in the coming months.

Alex Bice 48:45

Fantastic. Well, thank you again, for participating in this.

Robert Shimp 48:50

Of course. Yeah. My pleasure, Alex, this is great.

Alex Bice 48:53

All right, well, thanks. I'm just gonna say thank you again, just because I really appreciate it and I've really enjoyed sort of hearing your thoughts on all this, both your personal feelings as well sort of how the institution has responded.

Robert Shimp 49:09

For sure, absolutely. My pleasure.