



Hi, we're Understory

and we illuminate lesser-known aspects of history and the natural world through storytelling and works of art.

We're a burgeoning woman-owned company with a love for localized stories from smaller communities and sites.

We specialize in interpretive planning and exhibit creation, with services including custom illustration, visitor evaluation, and label writing. Our network of talented designers, fabricators, and other folks helps bring our interpretive experiences to life.

Understory co-founders, Laura Frick and Angela Mele
studiounderstory.com



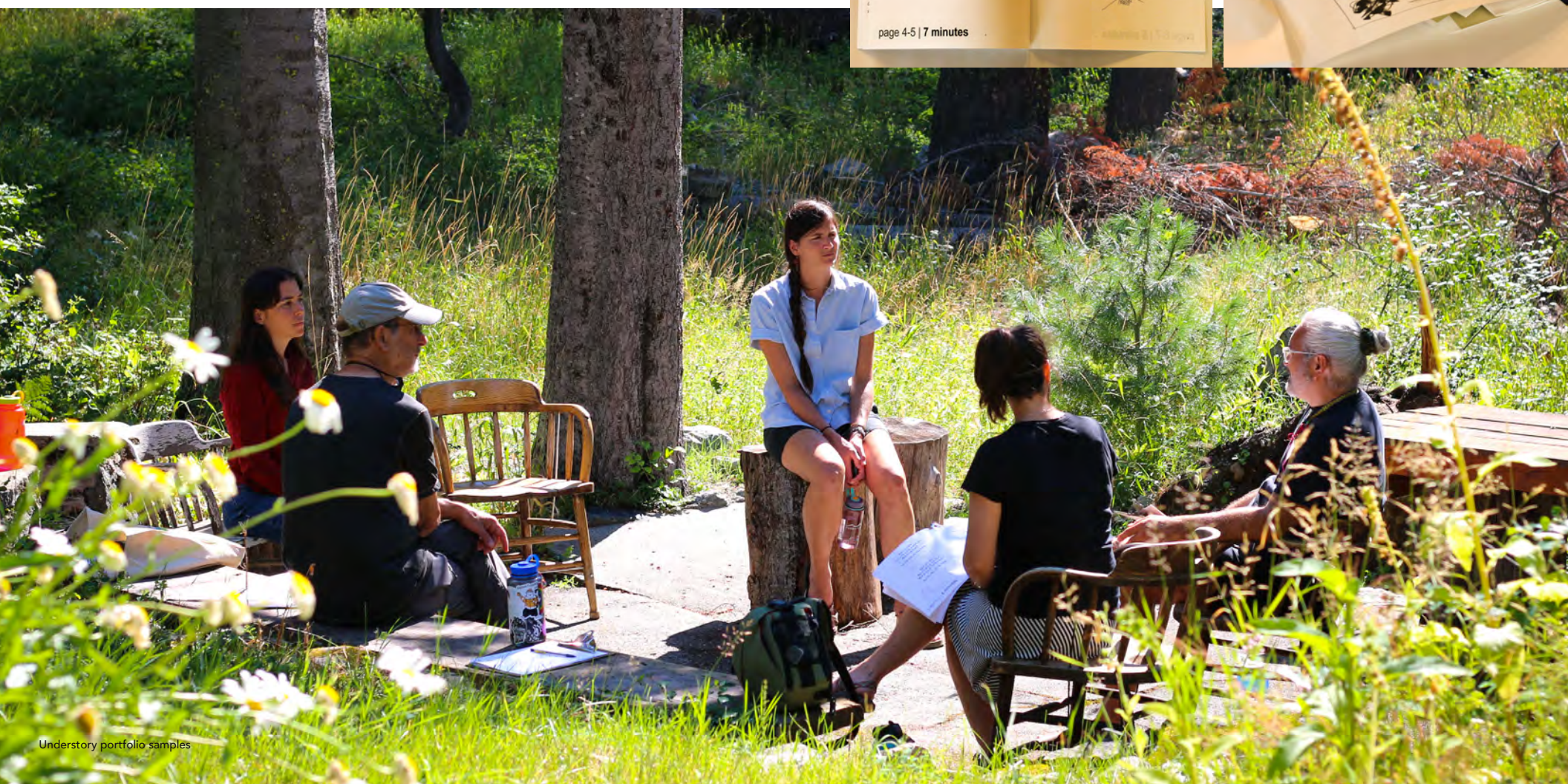
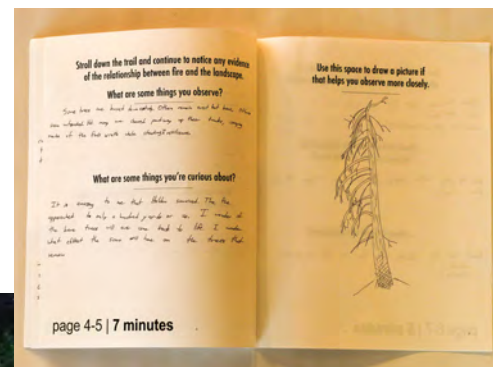
INTERPRETING FIRE AT HOLDEN VILLAGE

Holden Village, Washington

Holden Village, a remote wilderness community, was nearly ravaged by fire in 2015. Evidence of the burn surrounds the village today, leaving visitors wondering about fire in the area. In 2022, Angela and Laura came to Holden to lead a series of workshops on interpretive planning, resulting in stories and concepts for a fire-themed interpretive trail.

SERVICES

- Interpretive planning workshop facilitation
- Visitor evaluation



ROOT TOWERS

Saint Louis Science Center, Missouri

This outdoor exhibit shows how roots' "hidden powers" help life on Earth thrive. Visitors crawl through tunnels to observe growing roots, see microscopic imagery, and discover cutting edge research in root biology. Angela created these towers alongside many scientists and artists.

SERVICES

- Interpretive planning
- Content development
- Interpretive writing
- Coordination with scientists and artists
- Visitor evaluation
- Illustration



JASON BEACH WAYSIDE SERIES

Trap Pond State Park, Delaware

The local Black community's deep ties to a formerly-segregated beach in Trap Pond State Park lay quiet for generations. On Juneteenth 2022, Governor John Carney and Delaware State Parks unveiled a historic marker and three waysides commemorating the site's importance, and formally renaming the site to Jason Beach. Laura managed the production of the waysides — from interpretive planning to installation — working closely with community members and park staff.

This project won a 2023 Interpretive Media Award from the National Association for Interpretation.



SERVICES

- Interpretive planning
- Consultation with community members and content experts
- Content development
- Interpretive writing
- Design direction
- Fabrication coordination
- Coordination of online component featuring oral histories



COMMUNITY STORIES

For generations, the local Black community made memories at Jason Beach. Locals fondly remember gathering here to socialize, dance, picnic, and attend church services and baptisms.

"Coming down the dirt road from the highway to the beach, it was just a little narrow dirt road."

If you were clean when you came down, you'd get dirty before you'd get here 'cause it was so dusty."

— Carl Stanley

"Back then when it was segregated, the beach on the far side — the white kids played over there, and we played over here [at Jason Beach]."

And one of the biggest questions we had was, "I wonder if they're having as much fun over there as we're having over here."

— Jonathan Kellam

"We had the jukebox so we would go under the pavilion and dance. And there was good food we got from the concession stand."

Sometimes during the summer [we went to Jason Beach] basically every day, every other day, but mostly we went on Sundays after church. That was when the biggest gatherings were."

— Virginia Sneed

"I enjoyed Jason Beach because that was a meeting place for the community at large, to meet people from different parts of Sussex County. You would come there and have fun at the beach."

— Howard West

"We had a great time at Jason Beach listening to the jukebox and dancing. We played jazz, Lloyd Price and James Brown."

— Willie Mae Wortham



To hear and read more stories of Jason Beach, scan this QR code.

DELAWARE STATE PARKS

TRAP POND STATE PARK

SEGREGATION AT TRAP POND STATE PARK

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

By the early 1960s, disparities between Jason Beach and Headquarters Beach were evident. Complaints were mounting, and local legislators became concerned.

Roads

While the road to Headquarters Beach was paved, the dirt road leading to Jason Beach was full of ruts and often muddy.

Amenities

The pavilions, bathhouse, and fireplaces at Headquarters Beach were well-maintained while those at Jason Beach were falling into disrepair.

Concessions

While the food concession at Headquarters Beach was in good shape and fully-stocked, Jason Beach's was poorly maintained, understocked, and often closed.

"[Today,] I'm glad we're trying to be as inclusive as we can because then we really have the history of Trap Pond — that everyone enjoyed this, whether we were segregated, and now integrated, that we all enjoyed this beautiful park."

— Jonathan Kellam, Councilman, Third Ward, Town of Laurel, 2021

While there was no segregation required by law in Delaware's state park system during the 1950s and 1960s, numerous press accounts and interviews indicate Trap Pond's beach areas were segregated. Jason Beach was for Black visitors; Headquarters Beach (across the pond) was for white visitors.

"[Coming] from the north, that was sort of a shocker."

— Pete Giddof, Superintendent of Delaware State Parks in 1962, reflecting on segregation at Trap Pond State Park.

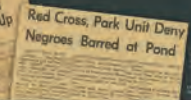
AN UNWELCOMING INCIDENT

In July 1962, three busloads of African American children arrived at Headquarters Beach for a Red Cross Swim Lesson. Park staff turned the children away, noting that the Seaford youth were scheduled for a different week, and canceled all swim lessons for the day. After outcry from the Red Cross, NAACP, and members of the public, the State Park Commission addressed the "non-official" segregation.

"No area under the jurisdiction of the State Park Commission, including Trap Pond, is or will be administered on a segregated basis."

— Delaware State Park Commission, 1963

The passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 underscored the end to segregation at Trap Pond and all other state parks. Even so, the Black community continued to use Jason Beach as their families had done for generations.



This project received two State Parks awards (without the courtesy of our sponsor) awarded to former Park Manager, George Calkins.

To access more historical resources on Jason Beach scan this QR code.

DELAWARE STATE PARKS

TRAP POND STATE PARK

ALMA CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, California

Midpen saved a culturally-significant landscape from development, then rehabilitated historic architecture and native ecosystems. Angela built upon Midpen's existing interpretive plan to convey the beauty and meaning of site features like mansion relics and new colonies of bats.

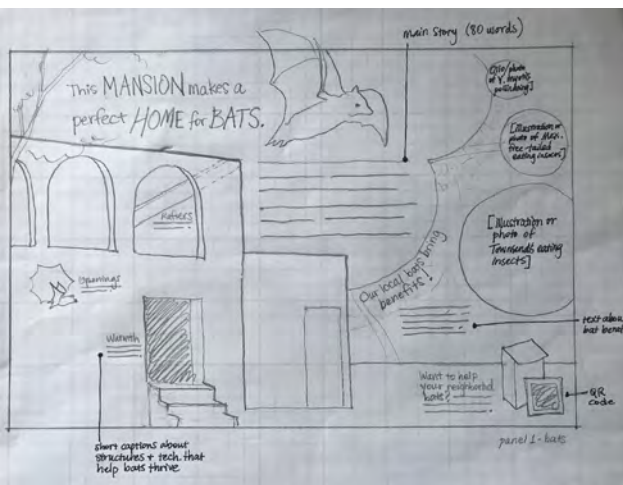
SERVICES

- Visitor evaluation
- Content development
- Writing/editing
- Historic photo acquisition
- Illustration
- Graphic design
- Fabrication coordination

"The panels are amazing! I particularly love the "home for bats" design where all of the illustrations are exquisite."

Jane Mark, Planning Manager

Below: concept sketch
Right: final design



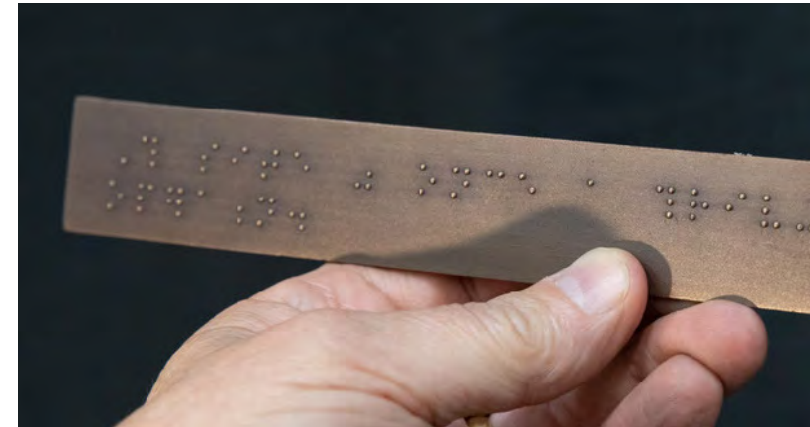
TACTILE WAYSIDE SERIES

Holts Landing State Park and White Clay Creek State Park, Delaware

New ADA-compliant trails at two state parks were an opportunity to incorporate highly accessible interpretation. Bronze-casted braille, tactile imagery, and QR codes linking to Section 508-conformant pdfs provide robust interpretation for all audiences. Laura managed the production of the six waysides, working with parks' staff, accessibility consultants, and outside contractors.

SERVICES

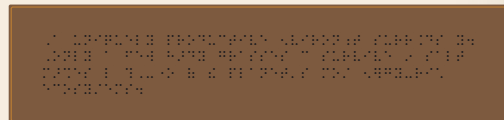
- Interpretive planning
- Content research and development
- Consultation with accessibility groups
- Interpretive writing
- Design direction
- Fabrication and installation direction



Left: Graphic for panel design, prior to tactile production.
Below: Final bronze tactiles.

Power PLANTS

A uniquely productive environment surrounds you. Only a few hardy grasses can survive in salt marshes like this—one of the planet's most energy-rich ecosystems.



Three species of grass dominate tidal salt marshes in Delaware:

Smooth cordgrass, Saltmeadow hay, and the invasive reed, Phragmites. You can identify the three grasses by their textures, sizes, and locations.



SALTMEADOW HAY

Spartococcus pumilus

- Thin, soft, and delicate; grows in dense stands
- Reaches a height of 2 feet, but wind often flattens it in twisting heaps called cowlicks
- Thrives in slightly higher elevations since it can only withstand being inundated by saltwater occasionally
- Used in the past as cattle feed, house insulation, and padding in coffins



SMOOTH CORDGRASS

Spartococcus alterniflorus

- Named for its smooth hairless leaves
- Tall form can grow up to five feet tall; short form grows 12 to 18 inches tall
- Typically grows in low-lying areas as it can withstand regularly being inundated by salt water
- Has specialized pores that excrete salt—you can often find crystals on the leaves



PHRAGMITES

Phragmites australis

- Big, thick-stemmed, and bulky
- Grows up to 15 feet tall
- Can be seen on the edge of the wooded area of this marsh
- Is an invasive plant widely distributed across the east coast—it's sprayed each fall to limit its spreading



Scan this QR code for an accessible version of this wayside.

SEA BEANS

Depending on the season, you may notice pops of color from the plant, glasswort. Vibrant green in summer and bright red in fall, this low marsh succulent is very salt-tolerant. Also known as "sea beans" or "pickleweed," glasswort is edible and was once used in pickling.



Shifting from summer green to fall red, glasswort (*Salicornia virginica*) highlights this marsh.



WETLANDS AT PUESTA DEL SOL

Sierra-Martin Architects for the Bellevue School District, Washington

A new Spanish immersion elementary school was built on a site containing wetlands near Seattle. The Bellevue School District incorporated the wetland and buffer areas into the new campus design to foster stewardship among students through the curriculum and outdoor learning opportunities. Angela created storybook-like signage to help kids recognize hidden water systems and native plants and animals.

SERVICES

- Interpretive planning
- Content research & development
- Interpretive writing
- Illustration
- Graphic design



PARK OFFICE EXHIBIT

Wilmington State Parks, Delaware

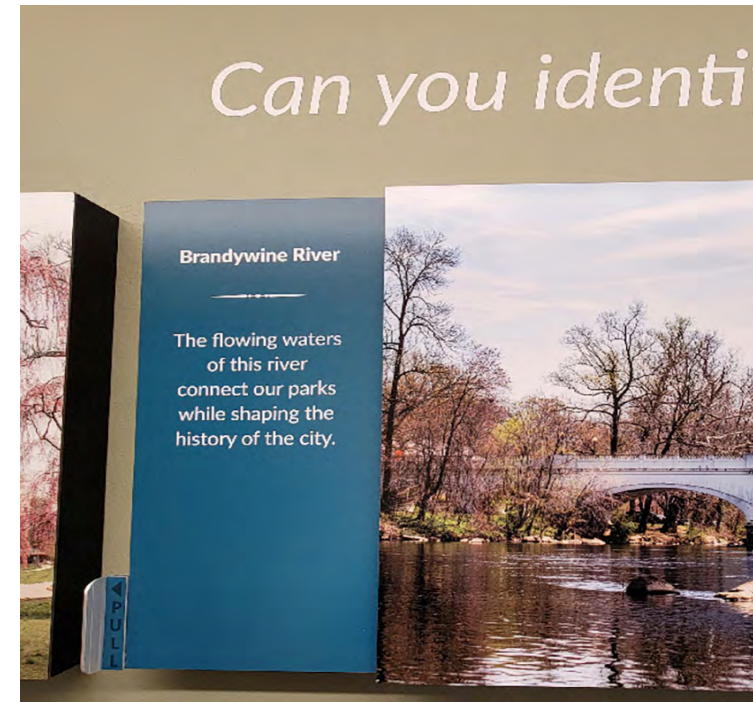
Wilmington State Parks is a series of historic city parks nestled along the Brandywine River. This new park office exhibit brings together the many tracts of the park, sharing cross-generational stories of community connections, and highlighting the park's treasured flora and fauna. Laura managed this entire project — from interpretive planning to installation — working closely with park staff and outside contractors.

SERVICES

- Interpretive planning
- Content research and development
- Interpretive writing
- Image sourcing
- Design direction
- Fabrication and installation direction

Below: Introductory park map exhibit

Right: Accessible pull tabs reveal the park's natural features



LEONARD ILLUSTRATIONS FOR TITANOBOA EXHIBIT

Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Washington

When the Burke Museum hosted the Smithsonian traveling exhibit, *Titanoboa: Monster Snake*, part of the gallery focused on snake research done by the University of Washington. Laura traveled with graduate student, Leonard to the San Juan Islands and Burke Museum research lab to document his research. Her resulting illustrations were featured in the exhibit.



AUSTRALIAN SLIME MOLD MONOGRAPH

"Secretive Slime Molds: Myxomycetes of Australia" (CSIRO Publishing, 2021)

Working for ecologist Dr. Steve Stephenson, Angela created several dozen illustrations of slime molds (myxomycetes) that are commonly found around the world. The illustrations were published in Stephenson's monograph and used for many public engagement efforts by Angela and others.



Concept sketch for an exhibit about slime molds



Collaria arcyronema



Metatrachia floriformis



Trichia varia