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 New Audiences for Old Houses: Building a Future with the Past
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A Thing of the Past: The Beginning of History Museums

Our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it.
Carl Becker, 1931

As we gather today to think about “building a future with the past,” my job is to begin at the beginning, to provide historical context for the day’s lectures, and to raise the question: **What can the history of the historic house museum tell us about changing audiences, what they were, what they are, and what they can become?**

As we walk through a few histories of individual American house museums, pay special attention to how each museum’s social purpose was framed. I will suggest that the American historic house museum was born in the explicit wish to use the history found within its period rooms for purposes that were highly relevant to past audiences, and that this was what gave the house museum vitality.¹ Afterward, we can use this history as a foundation for an informed analysis about “new audiences for old houses.”

The first American historic house museum, Washington’s Headquarters at Newburgh, was established by the New York legislature in 1850. The political motive

¹ For complete citations and a fuller discussion of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Orchard House, and Booker T. Washington National Monument, see Patricia West, [Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums](#), Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.

for the establishment of the museum expressed the nineteenth-century faith in the power of historic places to promote a kind of patriotic conversion experience in individual tourists. When the idea of creating the first public historic house was proposed, its founders declared:

No traveler who touches upon the shores of Orange County will hesitate to make a pilgrimage to this beautiful spot, associated as it is with so many delightful reminiscences of our early history. And if he have an American heart in his bosom, he will feel himself to be a better man; his patriotism will kindle with deeper emotion; his aspirations for his country's good will ascend from a more devout mind, for having visited [the] "Headquarters of Washington."

The effort to create the museum progressed slowly until pressures to find resources to promote unifying, patriotic sentiment became urgent. As the Civil War drew nearer, justifications for the establishment of the memorial emphasized its potential to maintain public faith in the strength of the Union. The New York legislature asserted "it will be good for our citizens in these days when we hear the sound of disunion reiterated from every part of the country...to chasten their minds by reviewing the history of our revolutionary struggle." The site was established on July 4, 1850, and a flag was raised sporting the immortalized words of Daniel Webster, uttered in the famous 1830 nullification debate and repeated on behalf of the "Great Compromise": "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." A crowd of over ten-thousand cheered

and sang an ode, "Freeman pause, this ground is holy." General Winfield Scott, emblem of national victory over Mexico, raised the flag.

Work soon began on the second, and in many ways more typical, nineteenth-century historic house museum, the home of George Washington in Mount Vernon, Virginia. Mount Vernon became a public institution by Virginia legislative charter in 1858, founded by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association led by Ann Pamela Cunningham. In two key respects, it would be the model after which the house museum movement was patterned: it was a recreated domestic environment memorializing a white male political figure, and it was conceived of and managed by a women's organization.

Cunningham, an unmarried South Carolinian who had been seriously disabled in a riding accident, may have seemed an unlikely leader for the ambitious and unprecedented project of organizing women to rescue a decaying mansion and open it to the public, but she proved more than competent. When she learned of the deteriorating state of Mount Vernon, she issued a statement to southern newspapers, suggesting that, since men were not acting to preserve the house, that women could organize to do so. Signing herself "A Southern Matron," she said:

...a spontaneous work like this...would furnish a shrine where at least the mothers of the land and their innocent children might make their offerings, in the cause of the greatness, goodness, and prosperity of their country.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was formed in 1853 and the daunting task of raising an enormous purchase price of two-hundred thousand dollars began. **It is in**

the language of legitimizing Mount Vernon as a public project that the ideological basis of the institution was constructed. In her initial efforts to recruit southern women to the cause, Cunningham employed a mixture of classical republican arguments about the decay of the political system because of rampant commercialism, combined with a profession of faith in the power of women to save that which corrupt businessmen or politicians would ruin. She alerted the "Ladies" that Mount Vernon, if not protected by southern women, would become "the seat of manufacturers and manufactories":

...Noise and smoke, the busy hum of men, destroying all sanctity and repose around the tomb of your own world of wonder...Never! Forbid it, shades of the dead!-- that pilgrims to the shrine of patriotism should find it forgotten, surrounded by blackening smoke and deafening machinery!-- where money, only money enters the thoughts and gold, only gold, moves the heart or nerves the arm!

Along with this thinly veiled attack on the looming economic power of the North, she added that the contentious government, which she described as fraught with "degeneracy," could obviously not be counted on to help.

Cunningham was soon forced to acknowledge that southern women alone would not be able to raise sufficient funds to purchase the estate and sharp sectional tension made the prospect of a North-South alliance a daunting one at best. She shifted her approach dramatically, issuing "An Appeal to the Citizens of the United States" on different terms. She elevated the emphasis on the healing power of female virtue, and asserted that such a "holy" enterprise run by apolitical women was above sectional

politics. She boldly argued that the rescue of Mount Vernon would serve to quiet "angry waves of sectional strife and bitterness." Circumventing her own views of the North, Cunningham maintained that North and South could be united by women and the home of Washington, as both were capable of exerting enough moral influence to prevent war.

Cunningham said:

Devoted women...triumph when the common homestead can be procured as a common heritage for the estranged children of a common father, the spell of whose memory will yet have the power to reunite them around his hallowed sepulcher.

To Cunningham's celebration of the power of women's moral influence to save the nation, other Mount Vernon founders added a related ideological argument for the creation of the museum: that Mount Vernon would shore up attachment to home and family. A donation to Mount Vernon's preservation was said to be "a public pledge of respect for the Christian home, with all its happy blessings, its sacred restraints." This argument played well in the North, but suppression of the fact that Mount Vernon was a slave plantation became a notable feature of the campaign for a public Mount Vernon.

To make a long story short, Mount Vernon was dedicated in 1860, and it did not prevent the War; Cunningham's own state would secede within the year. But it has survived over the years with its ideological roots securely intact. It retains its original patriotic, hyper-reverent tone, and its origin in the Civil War era contributes to tendency of its interpretation to sidestep the history of George Washington's lifestyle in context of slave labor.

After the Civil War, historic house museum founders frequently based their efforts at popular historical education on the perceived need to "Americanize"

immigrants, and to offer the inspirational power of historic "shrines" as an antidote to the political volatility that characterized fully industrialized America. House museums became more and more popular as the nineteenth century progressed into the twentieth.

One of the most important organizations in the house museum movement in the late nineteenth century and into the next was the Daughters of the American Revolution, which controlled over 250 house museums by the middle of the twentieth century. The DAR was founded in 1890 with the stated mission

to teach patriotism by erecting monuments and protecting historical spots, by observing historical anniversaries, by promoting the cause of education, especially the study of history, the enlightenment of the foreign population, and all that makes for good citizenship....

The DAR argued that historical education was a method of "safeguarding the land against the ravages of ignorance and sedition." Its plan to "carry the gospel of Americanism into every American home" was designed to address their fear

that the addition to our country's population of subjects of despotic monarchies so imbued with hatred for government that they might endeavor to substitute anarchy for law and order....

The Daughters pursued an active policy of acquiring historic houses and converting them into public museums to carry out their plans to encourage in immigrants a new loyalty to the American government.

This standard was not exceptional; many other house museums being founded

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected similar concerns. For example, the Orchard House museum in Concord, Massachusetts, commemorating Louisa May Alcott's authorship of the popular novel Little Women, was established in 1912, at a time when Concord's population had shifted rapidly from being an almost exclusively Anglo-American community to one having an immigrant majority.

Supporters of the museum claimed it would address the problem of "the wave of alien inundation...creeping in on old Concord." The presence of foreigners was perilous because they were "unfamiliar with our history," knowledge of which was perceived to be a stabilizing force. The memorialization of what the museum's founders thought of as the home of the "little women," of one version of the ideal nineteenth-century New England family, would teach the "aliens" the "value of the standard of living of [Alcott's] generation."

In addition to the reaction to the influx of immigrants was the remarkable conflict within Concord's elite community over changing gender roles. One of the reasons Orchard House has long stood as one of the few house museums commemorating a woman is that the founders, the exclusive Concord Woman's Club, could turn from the more controversial figure of Louisa Alcott, to her popular domestic novel, Little Women, which continues to heavily influence interpretation of the house. In the era in which Orchard House was established, tensions were simmering over the suffrage movement, and it was of interest to me that these soon-to-be warring factions could work together so closely on what was apparently a mutually agreeable project, despite the fact that Alcott herself was an ardent suffragist. The rhetoric surrounding the establishment of Orchard House and the way the period rooms were constructed are evidence that the

conflicts within the Woman's Club led them to focus the museum on the one value on which Concord's suffragists and anti-suffragists agreed: domesticity. In addition to being a vehicle for consensus, the "little women" theme also addressed the intended social function of the house museum, to shore up traditional domesticity by example thereby proselytizing the values of "Old Concord" in the face of changing gender roles and the influx of the "new immigrants." To that end, it was quite necessary to ignore the iconoclastic behavior of the actual Alcotts, for example, that Bronson Alcott moved his family to a commune that proposed the dissolution of the nuclear family altogether. And it served the volatile gender politics of the Concord Woman's Club (which I should add exploded in bitter conflict shortly after the museum was dedicated) to interpret the house as the "home sweet home" of the "little women" despite the fact that Louisa May Alcott was an adult when her parents took up residence there, and that she spent a good deal of the time in a boarding hotel in Boston, referring to the family home as "Apple Slump."

Orchard House remains primarily a "shrine" to old New England and "home sweet home." The period room exhibits and the "little women" imbued interpretive approach born early in the century have transformed Orchard House into a model single-family suburban home and the Alcotts-cum-Marches into the ideal American nuclear family. That a museum dedicated to the maverick Alcotts could represent these values is vibrant testimony to the historical circumstances of the original shapers of the institution's public meaning.

Thus far my discussion of house museum history has focused primarily on the efforts of women's voluntary associations. It was around the time that Orchard House

was founded, however, that the great era of women's almost complete dominance of the field began to wane, exemplified, I think, by the history of the establishment of Monticello as a museum. It began in July of 1912, when Maud Littleton sat before the House Committee on Rules of the United States Congress to argue that Monticello be converted from a residence to a museum celebrating Jefferson's domestic life.

Although she began tentatively, explaining "I am not an experienced public speaker and am a little bit nervous," Littleton's plan to convince the national government to displace the owner of the estate, Representative Jefferson Levy (D-NY), by right of eminent domain was far from timid. Littleton, wife of Representative Martin Littleton, also D-NY, was attempting to apply the progressive-era disposition to expand government power into realms traditionally dominated by women voluntarists to the cultural task of creating commemorative house museums.

Littleton's testimony began with a description of her childhood visit to Monticello, which had been occupied by Commodore Uriah Levy and his heirs since the 1830's. Explaining that she had found little of Jefferson's spirit there, that "an outsider, a rank outsider" had taken his place. Littleton's arguments against the Levy family's ownership echoed Cunningham's charge that government was failing in its duty to retrieve from private ownership that which should be a public "shrine":

Is it so possible that the commercialism of America is so deep-rooted that it will tolerate, much less indorse a sordid scramble between those who have the longest purse for our treasures which represent the highest point patriotism has ever reached in this country?

The initial attempt by Littleton and her Jefferson-Monticello Memorial Association to gain

congressional approval for the plan to evict Jefferson Levy passed the Senate, but was defeated in the House later that year. Undaunted, or perhaps encouraged by the slim margin by which the resolution was defeated, Littleton redoubled her efforts, expanding the organization's base.

It was in this phase that attacks on Levy became more strident, with one supporter declaring, "an alien sits at the fireside" where Jefferson planned his "immortal deeds." The application of the terms "outsider" and "alien" euphemize the anti-Semitism of the early Monticello campaign. Rumors abounded that Uriah Levy, the original purchaser of the estate, had obtained it by trickery. Associating the Levys with the "new immigration," a popular account of his acquisition of Monticello had the fifth-generation American speaking with a heavy foreign accent to carry out his nefarious negotiations. All this and more was leveled against Jefferson Levy's right of ownership and in favor of the use of eminent domain.

Levy eventually bowed to these and his own financial pressures at which point the Association promptly changed its portrayal of him, staying the course in pursuit of national acquisition until the mission was eclipsed by the advent of World War. After the war, another women's voluntary organization was established which also failed. Success was finally achieved by an alliance of democratic businessmen, politicians, and lawyers based in New York and Virginia, which received support from both women's organizations to inaugurate Monticello as a house museum in 1923. By the twenties, the house museum movement had entered a new phase in which the role of traditional women's organizations was being transformed by the character of the new century.

During the first World War, historic house museums had been sanctioned by their

celebrated power to induce national loyalty. For example, the Wilson administration's propaganda vehicle, the Committee on Public Information, sponsored through its Division for Work With the Foreign Born a much-publicized "pilgrimage" to Mount Vernon. On the Fourth of July, 1918, representatives of thirty-three ethnic groups absorbed the heady ambiance of the "shrine," while an Irish tenor sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." In the hyper-nationalistic postwar era, faith in this sort of inspirational experience, coupled with isolationism, fostered a boom in both the creation of "shrines" and the collecting of "Americana."

In the 1920's and 30's, the house museum movement entered a new phase with the increasing involvement of male professionals, government, and corporate leaders in museum history. Of course the flagships for this sea change were Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, created in the twenties by John Rockefeller and Henry Ford respectively.

In response to the success of Williamsburg in particular and as part of the WPA, FDR's New Deal policies expanded the national government's ability to acquire historic house museums, and today the National Park Service controls a vast range of historic resources in nearly four hundred national park units. It was in the early thirties that Park Service Director Horace Albright hired the aptly named Verne Chatelain to promote "a proper national historical policy" based on a system of "broad themes" of "national significance," the standard until recently which house museums were to meet in order to become national historic sites. Chatelain's early policies also established as a prerequisite for NPS acceptance that a historic site must have significant "integrity," that it should possess substantial, unaltered physical remains. As we now know, the

problem with these standards was that sites associated with ordinary people have often been neglected such that strict standards of "integrity" cannot be met, and they also have difficulty meeting the Park Service's criteria for "national significance," the application of which has historically been highly political. For example, in 1949 the Frederick Douglas house failed to meet this criterion when the Park Service declared Douglas's work had not been "significant" enough. Later, in the 1970's, political pressure from the black community helped to usher the remarkable Cedar Hill into the NPS.

Yet the National Park Service's interpretation of African-American history goes as far back as 1943, when legislation to make a "national shrine," of the birthplace of George Washington Carver was introduced by Missouri congressmen Dewey Short and Harry Truman to a receptive congress. The context for this support lay in wartime race relations and the increasingly organized political power of African-Americans. The necessity of engaging black soldiers and civilians in the war effort ran headlong into their discontent with Jim Crow, and the hypocrisy of fighting with a segregated military force against an enemy preaching a master race fueled African-American discontent. When Truman, a senator heavily dependent on the black vote, proposed the nation's first memorial to a black man, he was backed by letters of support from black and white leaders nationwide. Likewise, support from the press was wide-ranging, saying it would be "a contribution to Negro morale in the war," and "a partial refutation of the most damaging accusations the Axis has been able to level against us in this war-- charges relating to our treatment of the Negro." By 1943, Congress had few qualms about the use of eminent domain and the political salience of the proposal overrode reservations

based on the fact that the Carver birthplace, having almost no physical remnants of Carver's boyhood, failed to meet the NPS standards for "integrity of site." **The bill passed in July of 1943, in the heat of a summer remembered for violent racial conflict.**

If the nation's first memorial to an African-American demonstrates the link between politics and the establishment of national historic sites, the nation's first house museum commemorating African-American history does so even more dramatically. On February 3, 1956, on the heels of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and on the very day Autherine Lucy entered the University of Alabama, Congress held hearings on the establishment of Booker T. Washington National Monument in Virginia. This site's fascinating history is enmeshed in the Civil Rights movement, with Booker T. Washington's birthplace being offered up as a palliative to unrest. Testimony on behalf of the monument assured legislators that the site would heighten respect for the conservative social philosophy of Booker T. Washington, which emphasized self-help and acceptance of segregation in contrast with the political agitation sweeping the south, ultimately resulting in the controversial Brown v. Board school desegregation decision of 1954. The site's location in Virginia, one of the few states immediately affected by the desegregation ruling, placed it squarely in the midst of what was deemed "massive resistance" to Brown. Sidney J. Phillips, the monument's founder and chief advocate, found himself lobbying for the political support of white supremacists, who could turn to him as an example of a black leader who supported segregation.

However, unlike the Carver memorial, the Booker T. Washington monument

proposal was opposed by the National Park Service because the site failed to meet the NPS standard assessing "integrity of site." This was not surprising, since slave cabins were not often objects of careful preservation, and the same had been true of the Carver site which had entered the system so expediently in the context of world war. The Park Service recommended that the bill be defeated, and that if it passed, that Eisenhower should veto it, preferring instead to memorialize Washington at Tuskegee (although conceding that it had no plans to do so). Phillips therefore focused a great deal of his testimony on the meaning of birthplace memorials, saying "it is in keeping with American traditions to establish ...memorials at the birthplace of men and women who have contributed in some way to our national well-being," and that "people had a kind of sacred feeling for the birthplace." Phillips cited Washington's autobiography, Up From Slavery, calling it "the greatest success story ever written by a self-made American." This compelling mix of earnest wish, myth, and metaphor-- the desire of blacks to have their history be represented in a traditional birthplace memorial, and the identification of Booker T. Washington as an American self-made man, along with the pressing political concerns of the movement for civil rights, gleaned the votes of three-fourths of congress and a presidential signature despite NPS disapproval, creating Booker T. Washington National Monument in April of 1956, in the thick of the Civil Rights movement.

As we have seen, the social purpose of the historic house museum has clearly been derived from its utility in the land of the living. Yet our generation's effort to locate a current, culturally vital role for the house museum has been the subject of numerous anxious conference panels and professional conversations in recent years. Addressing

what Gerald George has called the “historic house malaise,” a 2004 article inquired “Does America Need Another House Museum?” The authors stated flatly that “the noble objective of interpretation for the public good may in fact be ill served when a building becomes a museum.” Compounding generic troubles such as aging boards, maintenance backlogs, and problems with collections care, we have been asking ourselves why house museum visitation has dropped given the apparent popularity of history. Standards for ethically closing house museums have been produced, and a new book outlines several practical methods for de-museumizing historic houses to assure their long-term preservation.²

Various explanations have been posited for this decline, among them the effects of terrorism on the national psyche and the diminution of planned leisure time. But perhaps the house museum is simply entering a period of retooling, during which it must evolve from earlier purposes that are no longer useful or engaging. As we reformulate house museums to meet current needs, it is instructive to recall the roots of the house museum as a “social instrument.”³ I have argued that the history of house museums in America reveals that they were created in response to the political and social issues of concern to the times in which they were founded, and that pertinence was the source of their vitality. While the goals and rhetoric from the house museum’s first hundred years may seem to us to range somewhere between quaint and offensive, it is nevertheless important to recognize that house museums must have cultural utility in the context of

² Gerald George, “The Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What’s Wrong,” History News 57, no.4 (2002): 4; Carol Stapp and Ken Turino, “Does America Need Another House Museum?” History News 59, no.3 (2004): 7-11; Donna Ann Harris, New Solutions for Historic House Museums, Lanham, MD: Alta Mira, 2007.

their own time or risk becoming moribund. Questions before us today, as we contemplate the new century's potential audience include: what meaningful purpose can the house museum serve for today's audiences? What content can underpin a new interpretive approach for house museums that will raise salient questions and provide historical perspective on current problems?

In recommending that we consider the utility of the history that we do in house museums, I am not suggesting mere pandering, or lapsing into nostalgia, or into vacant entertainment. Nor am I suggesting a revival of the tendency toward a sort of "social control" ethos from earlier centuries. Let me illustrate by offering some examples. I recently had the opportunity to advise a group of citizens where I live as they began an effort to create a house museum. I had lots of advice but pertinent here is the proposal that they carefully consider what the community *needs the museum for*. The town is engaged in the creation of a comprehensive plan, so one possible topic is the history of land use, since the house they are preserving was once a farmhouse, now in an area of commercial zoning. Another example comes from my experience teaching the fine graduate students at the Arizona State's Public History program a couple of years ago. I gave them the assignment of revising a local house museum— a very traditional one with all of the generic problems— with an eye to its relevance. Among a number of suggestions that I could cite here was my favorite. The house was named after and

3 Theodore Low, *The Museum as a Social Instrument*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1942.

focused on an Anglo-American family that had held the house for a brief time, when in fact the most vibrant history of the house occurred during its ownership by an immigrant Jewish family. Had this interpretive refocus been carried out, the museum would not be an icon to an idealized past with none of today's thorny problems arising from diversity. Last, at the National Park Service museum where I am honored to serve as Curator, we work with a concept we refer to as "cultivating civic wisdom." It is a presidential site, and as such, our visitors tend to expect us to glorify Martin Van Buren (a formidable task). What they find is that we deal explicitly with the complicated story of Van Buren's struggle with the slavery question as the nation drifted toward Civil War. In doing so we feel that we are contributing to a more sophisticated electorate, one less likely to romanticize the leaders or be shocked when it is discovered that they may have foibles. This larger theme is carried forth within a personal story of a politician trying to do the right thing, sometimes succeeding, but often failing, in the context of his domestic environment, revealing him to be, after all, a human being.

As we learned from Thelen and Rosenzweig in their important book, Presence of the Past, history is most alive to people when they can find a personal connection to it, and as their survey results indicated, people trust the history they learn from historic sites more than that from any other institutional source.⁴ Therefore the responsibility that we have is a substantial one. If you believe as I do that history has power to inform decisions, shape culture, and inspire or inhibit social action, then the civic role of the house museum is clear. To me, the public history in house museums is indeed history

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

as a social act, a “usable past” in the keenest and most current sense, a way of reaching an audience of citizens and energizing them with heightened understanding. I have alluded to this but let me be explicit: public history is public service. As we go through the day today, hearing about the latest and most innovative work revitalizing the house museum, let us be unafraid to claim its heritage as a vehicle for history that ordinary people need. As the great historian Carl Becker said in 1931, “our proper function is not to repeat the past but to make use of it.”
