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Dead Men Tell No Tales: How Can Creative Approaches to Communication Keep Historic Sites From Going Silent

Sabra Smith
University of Pennsylvania

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A thesis in Historic Preservation Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Science in Historic Preservation 2007.

Advisor: Gail Caskey Winkler

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Dead Men Tell No Tales: How Can Creative Approaches to Communication Keep Historic Sites From Going Silent

Abstract

The first evidence that there was a crisis looming for historic house museums came in 1988, when an informal study commissioned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation revealed that of 5,000 historic property museums in the United States, 54% of them received less than 5,000 visitors annually. This was followed in the 1990s by a series of conferences on issues such as "The Future of the Historic House Museum in the 21st Century" and "Rethinking the Uses and Stories of Historic Sites." Now that we are well into the first decade of the 21st century, these efforts have shifted to an emphasis on problem-solving, from creating a more professional nonprofit management model to the more drastic option of deaccessioning houses or their collections.

Experts predict that the trend of deaccessioning will not only continue, but increase. The most stunning example to date of a house museum shifting back to private ownership took place in December, 2006, when Colonial Williamsburg announced its intention to sell Carter's Grove plantation (built from 1750-1755), once considered a "must see" tourist destination. A spokesperson for Colonial Williamsburg said the site was closed due to declining attendance and shifting priorities. In April, 2007, the property, with protective easements in place, was listed with a specialty real estate firm at an asking price of \$19 million.

Comments

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COMMUNICATION KEEP HISTORIC SITES FROM GOING SILENT?**

Sabra Smith

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Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2007

Advisor
Gail Caskey Winkler
Lecturer in Historic Preservation

Program Chair
Frank G. Matero
Professor of Architecture

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Mike Denton had to run, but I thank him for his early help providing coffee and good humor, brainstorming, and sorting all the boxes of ideas in my head.

To my darling sons, Carter and Paul, ignored for so long while I chased this degree down, thanks for coping with your mommy's evil twin, for being patient on house tours and photography shoots, and for amusing yourselves when I dragged you to the library and my very long classes. Now let's go for a bike ride and get some ice cream.

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Chapter One: Dead Men Tell No Tales

An Emerging Dilemma

The first evidence that there was a crisis looming for historic house museums came in 1988, when an informal study commissioned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation revealed that of 5,000 historic property museums in the United States, 54% of them received less than 5,000 visitors annually.¹ This was followed in the 1990s by a series of conferences on issues such as “The Future of the Historic House Museum in the 21st Century” and “Rethinking the Uses and Stories of Historic Sites.”² Now that we are well into the first decade of the 21st century, these efforts have shifted to an emphasis on problem-solving, from creating a more professional nonprofit management model to the more drastic option of deaccessioning houses or their collections.³

Experts predict that the trend of deaccessioning will not only continue, but increase.⁴ The most stunning example to date of a house museum shifting back to private ownership took place in December, 2006, when Colonial Williamsburg announced its intention to sell Carter’s Grove plantation (built from 1750-1755), once considered a

¹ George, Gerald. “Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What’s Wrong.” *History News*, Autumn 2002, Vol. 57, #4.

² Among these were “American House Museums in the 21st Century: An Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, December 4-5, 1998 and “Museums and Houses: Rethinking the Uses and Stories of Historic Sites.” Center for American Art Symposium, Philadelphia Museum of Art, November 3-4, 2006.

³ Examples of these include “Historic House Museum Issues & Operations,” American Association of State and Local History/The National Trust for Historic Preservation. April 26-27, 2007 and “Best and Worst Practices in Deaccessioning: A One-Day Seminar in Legal, Ethical and Professional Guidelines for Collections Stewardship” sponsored by the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, March 13, 2007.

⁴ Tracie Rozhon, “Homes Sell, and History Goes Private.” *New York Times*, December 21, 2006.

“must see” tourist destination.⁵ A spokesperson for Colonial Williamsburg said the site was closed due to declining attendance and shifting priorities.⁶ In April, 2007, the property, with protective easements in place, was listed with a specialty real estate firm at an asking price of \$19 million.⁷

In a summary that echoes the opinions of many leading preservationists today, the *New York Times* reporter was led to conclude

Simply put, there may be too many antique houses, with too many similarly furnished living rooms, too few docents left to show them off, and too many families taking advantage of cheaper airfares to show their children places like Versailles, where tourism is increasing.⁸

These new trends and a challenging environment for all types of non-profit organizations⁹ indicate that historic sites have hard work and difficult choices ahead. There is also, finally, an acknowledgement that perhaps the preservation default of rescued residence to house museum is not always the most appropriate decision. Perhaps we can admit now that not every house has the architectural significance, the historical merit, or the relevant story to continue operations as a “museum” in the traditional sense.

⁵ Tracie Rozhon “Homes Sell, and History Goes Private.” *New York Times*, December 21, 2006.

⁶ Tracie Rozhon. “Homes Sell, and History Goes Private.” *New York Times*, December 21, 2006.

Additionally, in a private interview with Jim Bradley, public relations manager at Colonial Williamsburg, other reasons for releasing Carter’s Grove were loss of original 18th-century fabric, inability to properly restore to the period, and that the house, by now, was really an early 20th century Colonial Revival edition of an 18th-century plantation house. The house was barely breaking even in earnings vs. maintenance and the Foundation didn’t feel it advanced their mission vision about being engaged and informed citizens of the United States. July 2007.

⁷ There are no updates on the sale of Carter’s Grove as of July 2007. Jim Bradley, Personal Communication, July 2007. Also Colonial Williamsburg press release, April 2, 2007.

http://www.history.org/foundation/press_release/displayPressRelease.cfm?pressReleaseId=712

⁸ Tracie Rozhon, “Homes Sell, and History Goes Private.” *New York Times*, December 21, 2006.

⁹ Tom McKenna, Fels Institute for Public Policy, Personal Communication, January 2007

Surveys, books, workshops and special committees study other uses for these structures such as art galleries, community centers, or wedding halls in an attempt to preserve them and keep them accessible to the public. Other groups of experts working to make house museums more viable to the general public offer detailed guidelines for developing engaging tours, creating better signage and thought-provoking labeling, developing a more professional board of directors, or designing a more effective fundraising program.

Donna Ann Harris' *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (2007)¹⁰ and Jessica Foy Donnelly's *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (2002)¹¹ examine the decision-making process involved when evaluating a house museum's prospects and offer case studies featuring successful transformations. Harris examines sites that have shifted to new uses, including educational facilities, inns, or small professional offices. She indicates that the most common solution in current practice is to sell the house with protective easements to another owner who has the financial resources to preserve it.

The evidence that deaccessioning often gives a historic structure new purpose and may ultimately better ensure its long term survival must be encouraging to those preservationists who have long equated privatization with abandoning efforts to preserve and protect our built heritage. Carl Nold, President and CEO of Historic New England, is

¹⁰ Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2007.

¹¹ Jessica Fay Donnelly, editor, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2002.

an outspoken advocate for the future of historic house museums¹² and plainly states that with a declining interest in history¹³ and so many options for leisure time, there are simply too many sites that lack the merit to be maintained as such. Historic New England constantly evaluates its own properties to determine which should be museums or study houses, how best to connect to the community, which properties could be opened on a limited basis packaged as a specialty tour, or which of the less important sites might be best-used as a special event location to help support maintenance of more significant properties.¹⁴ Their easement program is among the few in the country that includes protection for interiors, as well as entire complexes of buildings, landscape features like old stone walls, and open space.¹⁵

Foundation of Success

For those houses in its collection, Historic New England's main priority is to foster a feeling of accessibility to the local community and the visiting public. The underlying mission of the entire organization is to help connect 21st century guests with the stories and environments of their historical predecessors. The promotion,

¹² Recent talks include "Best and Worst Practices in Deaccessioning: A One-Day Seminar in Legal, Ethical and Professional Guidelines for Collections Stewardship" sponsored by the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, March 13, 2007, a panel that also included Donna Ann Harris, author of *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*. Additionally, "Historic House Museums: Is there a future?" Historic New England, Salem, Massachusetts, sponsored by the Bowditch Institute, February 27, 2007.

¹³ Although a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that students in grades 4, 8, and 12 know more about history in 2006 than according to previous assessments in 1994 and 2001. "The Nation's Report Card: National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4,8, and 12" published by the United States Department of Education.

¹⁴ Susanna Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, Personal Communication, July 2007.

¹⁵ Brochure from Historic New England, 2007.

programming, and interpretation are designed to encourage the public to visit sites, whether simply to picnic on the pastoral grounds of a site like the Spencer-Pierce-Little Farm (c. 1690) without going on a house tour, or to role play what it might have been like to live or work in the Federal-style Otis House in downtown Boston.¹⁶

Historic New England appeals to a broad range of special interest groups, such as gardening enthusiasts and families with small children, with creative marketing and programming practices directed at their interests, including subject-focused membership packages, unusual special events, themed house tours, and the promotion of multiple sites on both a local and regional basis.¹⁷

The survival of a historic house museum depends to a great extent on visitor reaction to the “story” it tells and the tour that tells it. A site’s storylines help determine the success with which it can be promoted or explained to potential visitors. The actual tour experience will determine whether a potential long-term relationship is formed between visitor and site. Has the imagination been engaged? Can the visitor relate the house’s story and history to his or her own life experience? Has some choice piece of information registered that will be remembered in the future?

The importance of the interpretation and tour are discussed in *Great Tours!: Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites* (2001) which offers as a starting point a workshop plan for creating source-based tours (based on sound scholarship as

¹⁶ Susanna Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, Personal Communication, July 2007.

¹⁷ Suzanne Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, Personal Communication, July 2007.

opposed to “tradition” or stories handed down over time) and a format for training responsive and engaging guides.¹⁸

Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum (2000) is an intriguing and thoughtful look at the powerful potential that artifacts and the museum experience have to change our lives forever.¹⁹ The creation of and access to memory, Gaynor Kavanaugh argues, is a process of thought and emotion, and may involve a range of senses. Artifacts should not be desiccated vessels of history, he insists, but should tell stories that evoke response and comparisons with our own experience.²⁰ He implores curators and program directors to focus on understanding the people using the museum rather than the exhibit.²¹

When visiting museums and seeing the exhibitions constructed there, people bring their memories, interests and concerns. They have their own accounts of the past: some learned, others experienced. They also bring an instinctive understanding of what it is to be human and with that comes the potential for empathy and the capacity to learn about others. It also facilitates people sensing a little more about themselves and their relationships. People visit museums on their own, but more often than not visit in groups of kin or friends. They are equipped with the basic elements required for sympathetic remembering. These include a suite of triggers (visual and tactile stimuli and the conversation of others), narrators (one or several) and audiences (one or several [‘audience’ suggesting fellow visitors and the implication that, for example, a multi-generational threesome of grandmother, daughter and granddaughter will have different conversations and experience than three friends of similar age]).²²

¹⁸ Barbara Abramoff Levy, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd, Susan Porter Schreiber, *Great Tours!: Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2001.

¹⁹ Gaynor Kavanaugh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*. London: Leicester University Press, 2000.

²⁰ Gaynor Kavanaugh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*. London: Leicester University Press, 2000. p. 113

²¹ Gaynor Kavanaugh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*. London: Leicester University Press, 2000. p. 152

²² Gaynor Kavanaugh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*. London: Leicester University Press, 2000. p. 148

In a similar vein, David Carr, in *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (2003), asks museum directors to evaluate whether they are effectively enabling the visitor - whether child or adult - to learn by creating a personal experience.²³ He calls museums institutions of mind and of service that should not present a static history but should change and “reflect the thinking of others as though thought were a form of light.”²⁴ Carr celebrates the remarkable potential of objects, narrative, sense and experience to inform and affect our lives at the same time he seeks to inspire museum leadership to reevaluate and recommit to their mission.

Listening in on Museum Conversations (2004) attempts to quantify the visitor experience and examine how learning takes place in an exhibition environment.²⁵ The authors studied responses to items on display and the form of conversations and thought that resulted, from superficial and misinformed reaction to deeper processes connecting the experience to prior learning.

Already putting some of these ideas into reinvigorating the image of the historic house museum, Historic New England’s Carl Nold encourages site managers to embrace creativity in all their endeavors and to place the needs of the visitor first. He exhorts them to stop giving the “architecture and object tour,” saying that the average visitor can’t relate and doesn’t really care. A Victorian presentation mode no longer works in

²³ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2003.

²⁴ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2003. p. 66

²⁵ Gaea Leinhardt and Karen Knutson, *Listening in on Museum Conversations*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004. The authors developed a conceptual, theoretically-based model and used a number of different methods (interviews with curators, taped recordings of visitors in an exhibit, observation of circulation patterns within an exhibit space, etc.) to compile data for analysis. An appendix explains their methodology in great detail.

the 21st century, he says, and program directors should be willing to experiment, think about new themes, take ideas from theater, and be willing to try something new.²⁶

Certain sectors of the museum field have embraced the concept of marketing for decades, especially in the case of blockbuster art shows that contribute significantly to the bottom line through ticket and gift shop sales. The field of preservation has been slower to embrace the practice, either focusing promotion efforts solely on membership drives or spurning the idea altogether because marketing is perceived to be in conflict with the social or educational mission of an historic site.²⁷ In fact, marketing and promotional efforts can help support, sustain, and drive the mission of the site as opposed to detracting from it.

World-renowned advertising expert Donnie Deutsch defines a brand as “a set of shared values,”²⁸ which describes to some extent the original purpose of house museums: to share and perpetuate a patrimony that was valued as a cultural basis.²⁹ Margot Wallace’s excellent *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty, and Support* (2006) is a recent treatment of a long-overdue subject and offers an inspiring overview of how to create image and personality that make a museum distinctive and appealing in a competitive environment.³⁰ She provides a step-by-step, department-by-

²⁶ Carl Nold, “Historic House Museums: Is there a future?” Historic New England, Salem, Massachusetts, sponsored by the Bowditch Institute, February 27, 2007.

²⁷ Robert D. Herman & Associates, *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Non-Profit Leadership and Management, Second Edition*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2005. p. 281

²⁸ Donnie Deutsch, “The Big Idea.” CNBC television, October 9, 2006.

²⁹ Patricia West. *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. p. 93

³⁰ Margot Wallace, *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty and Support*. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2006.

department analysis, offering practical advice that emphasizes thought and creativity over budget. Although smaller historic house museums may have no interest in chapters on audio tours or developing an online gift shop, they should consider Wallace's assessment of the crucial importance of "identity" in their struggle against being dismissed by the public's "seen one, seen them all" mentality as "just another historic site." [See Laurel Hill Cemetery case study for more on using creativity to create or renew a "brand."]

It is imperative that the historic house museum establishes itself as an significant and visible member of its surrounding community. This is important everywhere, but especially in resource-rich areas like Chicago, Boston, or especially Philadelphia which boasts over 300 historic house museums,³¹ many of which date from the colonial period. Finding a unique niche is a challenging but an important step in developing a public identity that will draw visitors.

In all this discussion, there seems little focus directed at whether part of the problem is that the houses, or their stories, or that the benefits of visiting them are virtually unknown to a public with a short attention span and limitless choices in how to spend their valuable leisure time.

³¹ In his remarks, Steering Committee member Ken Finkel referred to the vast portfolio of historic properties in Philadelphia as "an embarrassment of riches." "Heritage Development in Philadelphia." Chemical Heritage Foundation, Conference sponsored by the National Heritage Area Philadelphia Steering Committee, October 6, 2006.

Despite the fact that what any attraction needs most is awareness in order to draw visitors, funding, and community support, there is a paucity of materials that specifically discuss the potential of promotion and public relations to help historic house museums.³²

Numerous guides on non-profit management include brief sections on public relations, but place more emphasis on the importance of community connection and keeping local civic and government leaders informed of progress and activities. Peter F. Drucker's *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Practices and Principles* (1990) provides a broad and useful overview.³³ Guides like *Full Frontal PR* (2003) or *Guerilla Public Relations* (1993) are too product-oriented for the novice to be able to translate into a practicable program for an historic house museum.³⁴ Neil and Philip Kotler offer useful insights in *Museum Strategy and Marketing*,³⁵ although some of the suggestions seem dated, perhaps simply because of the major expansion in the use of the internet since the book's 1998 publication date. Philip Kotler and Alan R. Andreasen offer more up-to-date suggestions in the most recent edition of *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit*

³² For the purposes of this discussion, the concept of promotion and public relations have been broadened to involve an interrelated and diverse menu of communication approaches, beyond the traditional publicity-oriented focus of press releases and media calls. Referenced here it encompasses special events, open houses, community outreach, publications, websites, "souvenirs," and even, to some degree, the interpretive choices since the museum's narrative is often the foundation upon which all communication efforts build.

³³ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Practices and Principles*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.

³⁴ Richard Laermer with Michael Prichinello, *Full Frontal PR: Getting People Talking About You, Your Business, or Your Product*. Princeton: Bloomberg Press, 2003. Michael Levine, *Guerilla PR: How You Can Wage an Effective Publicity Campaign, without Going Broke*. New York: Harper Business, 1993.

³⁵ Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, *Museum Strategy and Marketing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

Organizations (2003),³⁶ which is both broadly informative and useful for specific objectives.

Even the National Trust for Historic Preservation makes it difficult to find relevant information in its list of available publications. It seems doubtful that a small town historic site seeking techniques for placing an article in the local newspaper would think to look under the “tourism” heading. If they did, they would find a total of three publications: a twenty-page booklet on training guides, a twenty-page booklet on “Touring Heritage Places” that includes tips for “planning, marketing, and hosting effective heritage tourism programs,” and a 76-page document that includes twenty-four cultural heritage case studies, with no real indication about what practical, hands-on information, if any, is offered.³⁷

Cultural Heritage Tourism

The academic field began to investigate the intriguing interplay between history and tourism in the 1990s. In his foreword to a collection of essays on architecture and tourism, Davydd Greenwood notes “how rich the topic and how the subject immediately

³⁶ Alan R. Andreasen and Philip Kotler, *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations, Sixth Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

³⁷ National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation Books 2007 catalogue. Under the “Building Better Organizations” category, there are two brochures listed that include public relations strategies. Once again, communications strategies are given short shrift in a section that focuses primarily on fundraising, membership development and personnel issues.

leads beyond tourism itself and into the analysis of many broader, social, historical, and artistic questions.”³⁸

Indeed, as an increasing number of cities look to the “creative class” to drive their local economies,³⁹ the arts and culture sector is being measured and analyzed like never before. Yet, the current outlook for museums in terms of tourism data is confusing. While some sources show increased visitation and suggest that the post 9/11 slump has ended,⁴⁰ others offer a pessimistic view of overall trends.

A 2005 report from the National Trust for Historic Preservation reported that 81% (118 million) of the U.S. adults who traveled in 2002 were considered cultural heritage travelers, who included historical or cultural activities on almost 217 million personal trips (an actual increase from the 1996 statistics).⁴¹ Cultural heritage travelers stay longer and spend more money than the average tourist, and nearly a third of them say that they chose their destination based on a specific historic or cultural event or activity.

Williamsburg reports that visitation dropped from 1.1 million in 1985 to 710,000 in 2005, despite investing millions of dollars to engage new audiences.⁴² Other large

³⁸ D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren, editors. *Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place*. Oxford: Berg, 2004. Foreword by Davydd J. Greenwood, p. xv

³⁹ Richard Florida’s notion of the creative class -- which he defines as a segment of well-paid, highly educated individuals involved in creative fields such as arts, music, design, entertainment, science, and engineering – is drawn to large cities and regions with abundant artistic and cultural offerings to both satisfy and inspire its creative nature. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

⁴⁰ United States Department of Commerce, Office of Travel and Tourism, indicated in preliminary 2006 data that foreign visitation to the United States increased 5% and showed record-breaking dollar totals over figures for the year 2000. An increase of 1.9 million foreign visitors is projected for 2007. United States Department of Commerce press release, April 2007.

⁴¹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, “2005 Cultural Heritage Tourism Fact Sheet.” December 2005.

⁴² These numbers reflect paid admissions. Jim Bradley, Public Affairs Manager, Colonial Williamsburg, Personal Communication, July 2007.

scale “living history” sites, such as Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and Shelburne Falls in Vermont, are also struggling. Their difficulties prompt inquiry into what kind of experience heritage tourists are seeking. One of the uncomfortable criticisms of Williamsburg has long been the nature of authenticity in its recreated town and an uneasy friction between history and theme park.⁴³ Do heritage tourists respond to large-scale sites that recreate history, or have preferences shifted to a small-scale, personalized experience that feels more “authentic” in quality and more closely linked to the historical past? Do these statistics indicate opportunity for small museums?

Williamsburg’s 2006 visitation statistics show an increase in response to their new presentation, “The Revolutionary City,”⁴⁴ which takes carefully researched historical material relevant to topics on the front pages of today’s newspapers and presents it in a dramatic and thought-provoking manner.⁴⁵ A Williamsburg spokesperson explains that the results of a random survey revealed that only 8% of the population interviewed indicated that they have a strong interest in history and preservation and would be likely to visit Colonial Williamsburg. However, 62% of the survey respondents indicated that while they were unlikely to visit for historical or preservation-oriented reasons, they

⁴³ For many years, regional marketing efforts have packaged Williamsburg along with local golf courses, amusement parks like Busch Gardens, and even the local mall in an effort to build tourism in the area. I staffed a familiarization tour for foreign journalists in 1992 on behalf of Busch-Gardens, in cooperation with the local tourism board. Our trip included visits to all of the above.

⁴⁴ Paid admissions in 2005 were 710,500 and in 2006 totaled 745,000, an increase of 34,500 visitors. Jim Bradley, Personal Communication.

⁴⁵ In “War in the West,” part of Williamsburg’s “The Revolutionary City” experience, captured British General Henry Hamilton is brought to Williamsburg, where instead of being treated in the genteel manner customary to captured enemy officers, he was held without legal counsel or public contact for eighteen months.

might visit if they were intellectually challenged or stimulated.⁴⁶ Williamsburg's marketing data supports the importance of making a connection for visitors between past and present, both before they visit and while they are on the site.

In recent years, both Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon have learned that they did not need to change their mission or overall "brand" image, but they did need to shift to involve the public with engaging, thought-provoking material that has renewed visitation and encouraged tourists to realize that these are not "been there/done that" historical sites.⁴⁷

Data for the City of Philadelphia confirm that tourism is on the rise. Extensive marketing efforts by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation increased overnight leisure visitation by 55% between 1997, when it began its marketing efforts, and the year 2005.⁴⁸ That same year the region received 27 million visitors, an increase of two million from 2004.⁴⁹ Tempering the encouraging tourism statistics is a recent report from the RAND Corporation that studied Philadelphia's arts and culture ecology and compared it to ten other cities. In an otherwise vibrant and thriving regional arts economy, Philadelphia's historical sector was highlighted as a key weakness.

The historical sector, like many such sectors in the country as a whole, faces a major crisis in the next decade because of aging caretakers, severe funding problems, deteriorating facilities, and the absence of general

⁴⁶ Jim Bradley, Public Affairs Manager, Colonial Williamsburg, Personal Communication, July 2007.

⁴⁷ Jim Bradley, Colonial Williamsburg, July 2007. Also James C. Rees, "Forever the Same, Forever Changing: The Dilemma Facing Historic Houses." *American House Museums in the 21st Century: An Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium*, 1998.

⁴⁸ Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, "Frequently Asked Questions," <www.gophila.com>

⁴⁹ Center City District & Central Philadelphia Development Corporation, "State of Center City 2007." p. 12

public appeal (“historical sites are not suited to today’s life styles,” said one interviewee). The disorganization and fragmentation within the historical sector could reduce the opportunities for collaboration with the arts sector. Moreover, a collapse of the historical sector may draw funds and attention away from the arts. The fact that the Liberty Bell is the most frequently visited site in the region may indicate that the problems the region’s historical sites face are less a by-product of a loss of public appeal and more a result of inadequate financial and staff resources to supply the marketing and programmatic initiatives needed to compete with other arts, entertainment, and recreation options in the region.⁵⁰

Historic sites in Philadelphia, where there is immense choice and competition for the attention of cultural heritage tourists, as well as house museums all over the country cannot remain passive institutions awaiting the public to find them. Led by the model of Historic New England, part of their strategy must become accessibility and the creation of awareness in and connection with the community.

Sites must stop considering other historic sites as “competition” and regard them instead as potential partners. They must talk to their patrons and guests, ask for objective opinion and avoid being locked in an interpretive narrative that is no longer compelling. Historic house museums can no longer afford to be myopic, but must instead look for areas for improvement and connection with the 21st century, thereby creating a direct link between the past and the present.

⁵⁰ Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje, Jennifer L. Novak, *Arts and Culture in the Metropolis: Strategies for Sustainability*. Rand Corporation, 2007. p.64

Public Relations in Preservation History

Since the earliest days of preservation, public relations tactics have been used to rally public support, link historical sites with contemporary politics,⁵¹ raise funds, and fight off threats on behalf of historic buildings and landscapes.

In the 1920s, when the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation acquired Monticello, it also took on substantial debt that previous years of fundraising efforts had failed to eradicate. The national director, Theodore Fred Kuper, staged a series of attention-getting “stunts” that increased public attention to the site and had significant positive impact on subsequent fundraising efforts. These included a “Jefferson Day” to raise awareness of Jefferson’s role in American history and push for a monument in Washington. Later, a searchlight was set up in Charlottesville, and as invited media and local citizens waited, a telegraph from New York City Hall signaled the light to be turned on and directed at Monticello, three miles away. Before year’s end, Kuper (who was one of only two full-time employees) placed an announcement in the *New York Times* announcing that the site’s debt load had been significantly reduced through public support and the sale of bonds.⁵²

Robert E. Lee’s boyhood home, Stratford Hall, was aided by a long article in the September 23, 1928 edition of the *New York Times*, announcing that the Connecticut Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) would raise a motion at the

⁵¹ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.

⁵² Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. *Preservation Comes of Age, From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949, Volume 1*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981. p. 185

annual meeting that year to move for purchase of the site.⁵³ Like the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association before them, early in their efforts they printed 10,000 copies of an illustrated booklet to be used for both fundraising and publicity, called *Stratford on the Potomac*.⁵⁴

The booklet was researched and produced by Ethel Armes, an early supporter of the Stratford Hall preservation effort, who immediately envisioned an elaborate publicity campaign. From the Greenwich, Connecticut, headquarters of the UDC, she continued her research into documentation that would assist in the restoration of Stratford and illuminate the history of the generations of the Lee family that lived there. To create public support for preservation of the house and the creation of a national shrine in Lee's memory, she enlisted every opportunity possible to disseminate information. Armes sent clippings and newsletters to state societies and the general public and placed new stories in newspapers and general interest magazines. In addition to distributing *Stratford on the Potomac*, which highlighted the success to date of the ladies' mission, she also sent out small, one-page flyers summarizing press reaction to the Stratford movement. She developed a newsletter to encourage state societies to continue their efforts with sales, lectures, and meetings. The newsletter also allowed the state chapters to share successful fundraising ideas, leading to increased donations.⁵⁵

⁵³ Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age, From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949, Volume 1*. p. 193

⁵⁴ Hosmer notes that while the Stratford Hall booklet still had an inspirational patriotic tone, it was better founded in scholarship and had a better appreciation for the architectural significance of the structure than the efforts of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association eight decades previously. p. 190

⁵⁵ Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981. p. 199

In the 1940s, the last owner of the historic Robert Campbell House in St. Louis died, bequeathing the house and its contents to Yale University which prepared to sell them. Beginning with a letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in February 1931 questioning rumors about the fate of the house, subsequent newspaper and radio coverage of the building's fate sparked a massive fundraising campaign. The contents of the building were saved, yet the house was put up for sale during wartime, when patriotic duty called for support of war bonds, not old houses. During the eleventh hour, the owners of the local department store came forward and, in honor of their establishment's fiftieth anniversary, made a gift of \$10,000. The house was saved and a valuable partnership was formed; in fact, the department store promoted its support of the house for many years in its advertising campaigns.⁵⁶

The nascent preservation movement understood the powerful use of communication to support their cause. Too often organizations' attempts to reach out and disseminate news, updates, or a call to action are lackadaisical or stunted. Efforts to prevent bulldozing and construction on the site of the Lazaretto outside Philadelphia, regarded by many in the field as possibly one of the least known but most important historic sites in the entire country, focused mainly on local media and involved only a small group of historians, preservationists, and archaeologists who never quite gathered the momentum to save the site.

⁵⁶ Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981. p. 219.

Communication as opportunity comes in so many forms today. Historic New England realizes the importance of media awareness and requires each of its site managers to become involved in their local community, including regular contact with local media. In the 21st century, the explosion of alternative forms of media via the internet pose both a challenge and an opportunity to historic sites. A well-designed website, offering depth of content, can be an excellent means to reach audiences - children and adults - locally and even nationally. The expansion of the web 2.0 including the blogosphere, peer-to-peer and social networking has vast implications for communications techniques and provides opportunities for internet-based advocacy and promotion undreamed of in the early days of the preservation movement. Historic sites must look at all the possibilities for communication that are available in the 21st century and take advantage of all they have to offer.

Chapter Two: Connection and Communication

Telling Tales: The Betsy Ross House and the Powel House

Current thinking posits that one must fire the public's imagination to attract it to a historic site in the first place, and then provide thought-provoking links that connect old stories with current events and personal experience when they visit the site in person. The vitality of the interpretation and programming provide the foundation for all communications efforts that, in turn, support the mission of the site. As an example, let us compare two historic house museums in Philadelphia and examine whether they apply these principles and with what success.

The Betsy Ross House and the Samuel Powel House both date from the 18th century and are within walking distance of each other and Philadelphia's tourist-rich Independence Hall area. The major difference between the two sites today is perception and that public perception drives hundreds of thousands to the Betsy Ross House while the Powel House struggles in relative obscurity, though some experts would contend that its well-documented historical and architectural merits far outweigh those of the Betsy Ross House.

Betsy Ross (1752-1836) is a mythic figure created over time. She stands among the Founding Fathers as the only woman with a well-known, compelling story to which young schoolgirls can relate. Where once she stood as a patriotic symbol of our fledgling nation, additional investigation and a more modern emphasis on documented fact has

shed doubt on the myth. As a result, Betsy Ross's story has evolved into an engaging tale of what it meant to be a single, working mother in a different historical period.⁵⁷

Consider this article from an online travel website for women, in which the author shares her experience visiting the home of her childhood idol.

Turning to the [guidebook] section on Betsy Ross was like opening a big, decaying can of worms. Sometimes, historians work too hard; sometimes, they should let well enough alone. The article talked about the "legend" of Betsy Ross. Completely in denial, I went into the Betsy Ross House gift shop and began perusing their books. Well, I guess I hadn't gotten the memo about how Betsy Ross had probably not sewn the first American flag. Apparently, Betsy Ross was married three times. Apparently, she went by the name Betsy Ross less than four years, her cumulative name being Elizabeth Griscom Ross Ashburn Claypoole. The storybook that I had taken as gospel all those years ago, the woman whom I'd secretly preferred to all other colonists, my paladin and my pet, was a fraud. Now how does a person come to the birthplace of the Constitution and come away with LESS history than when they arrived? Oh, Philadelphia, how could you? In place of that iconic image of a young, bonneted, nimble-fingered woman with the first American flag draped down her lap like a second skirt, history offered a consolation prize. Maybe Betsy Ross didn't sew the first American flag, but her life does tell the story of a particularly daring woman ahead of her time.⁵⁸

Ross's home is a modest three-story brick structure on Arch Street. Observing tourists at the site, it is apparent that many barely even notice the house since their attention is drawn to the large, bunting-festooned courtyard and gift shop entrance designed to accommodate large numbers of tourists.

⁵⁷ The brochure from the Betsy Ross House seeks to make her emblematic of many women of the Colonial Period, in a manner that women of the 21st century can understand and relate too. "Many women, like Ross, were left behind by husbands away in battle, fighting for our country's independence, some of whom were seriously injured, even killed, in the cause of freedom. These brave women became heads of the family – required to manage workshops and businesses, while simultaneously caring for large and extended families."

⁵⁸ Stephanie Block, "Philadelphia, USA: The Question of Betsy Ross" Tango Diva, women's travel website, <http://www.tangodiva.com/index.php?page=network&story_rev_id=165>, accessed January 2007

There is no primary documentation confirming she actually performed the deed she is most famous for; this claim is based on affidavits signed by descendants who offered family tradition as their evidence. Modern interpretive standards and their emphasis on reliable primary documentation means that today, the story of Betsy Ross and the flag is now presented as “legend” rather than historical fact.⁵⁹

Researchers have been able to document that the existing house was most likely, but not absolutely the building she lived in. While certainly conveying the essence of what life was like in a modest home of that period, it is not purely “authentic”⁶⁰ in that it lacks an extensive collection of original furnishings and details and, in fact, features some reproduction pieces.⁶¹ The exit area from the gift shop to the passage toward the house features a small assemblage of items linked directly to Ross, but its location and the manner in which it is displayed do not command the attention of the visitor.

The iconic stature of the subject draws visitors with the result that The Betsy Ross House is the ninth most visited site in Philadelphia,⁶² hosting 285,750 visitors in 2005.

In light of the high visitation figures, it came as a surprise to find the visit itself a disappointing experience. The visitor must pass through the gift shop in order to gain access to the house. An audio tour is available, minimal signage is provided in each

⁵⁹ The Betsy Ross House’s signage and informational brochure for tourists make this distinction clear. The brochure says “Although no official records exist to authenticate the story of Betsy Ross and the making of the flag, this patriotic story has become a colorful thread in the complex tapestry of colonial American history during the founding days of our nation.”

⁶⁰ Issues related to definitions of, or visitors’ possible preferences for “authenticity” are a fascinating subject, but beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶¹ “The Betsy Ross House” promotional brochure freely admits that reproductions are used, stating, “The House is furnished with period antiques and some reproduction furniture.”

⁶² Center City District & Central Philadelphia Development Corporation, “State of Center City 2007,” page 15

room, and there are few costumed interpreters present. Rooms are isolated from the visitors by large panes of plexiglass. Dim lighting and narrow spaces create a forbidding sense rather than signifying an effort to recreate authentic living conditions. In some house museums, the absence of other guests allows one to imagine travelling back in time and living as the early residents did; here there is only the impression that one should keep moving toward the exit.⁶³

A graduate student in the University of Pennsylvania's graduate program in Historic Preservation, doing research on historic house museums, used the tour evaluation form from *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites* on her visit to the Betsy Ross House.⁶⁴ The audio tour and signage left her wanting more information about the interaction between the house and its residents and a better understanding of their daily life. Her interaction with the costumed interpreters in place that day was perfunctory and the guides failed to engage other tourists that were present, who moved on to the next room. The plexiglass barriers seemed off-putting, and she observed that the groups moved through the spaces quickly. To her the house felt "distant, disconnected, museumified." Failing to engage the visitor at any level other

⁶³ I have watched tourists encounter the exterior of the Betsy Ross House on many occasions, at different times of the year. They do not see the house. Human nature draws us to activity and the activity is in the courtyard and gift shop. On a tour of the house in March 2007, my two young children found the interior of the house extremely frightening. Their sense was that we were in a place that was not allowed. There was nothing to engage their imaginations, if they didn't already know the story of Betsy Ross.

⁶⁴ Barbara Abramoff Levy, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd, Susan Porter Schreiber. *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2001. Worksheet 7.1, "Taking a Tour from the Audience Perspective," p. 105

than through items for sale in the gift shop, she declared the Betsy Ross House “a historic house museum for the faint of heart.”⁶⁵

South of the Betsy Ross House, at 244 South Third, a quiet tree-lined street, is the elegant Georgian brick mansion that Samuel and Elizabeth Willing Powel moved into at the time of their marriage in 1769. Samuel Powel was wealthy, educated, and well-traveled. He served as the last mayor of Philadelphia under British rule and was the first mayor of the city after independence; he was later called “the Patriot Mayor.” Elizabeth Powel came from a notable Quaker family that lived just north of the Powel House location on Third Street.

The Powels were a wealthy couple who entertained lavishly and hosted the political and social elite of the day, including George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin and the Marquis de Lafayette. Benjamin Franklin’s daughter attended George Washington’s birthday party here and wrote an account to her father. John Adams wrote home enthusiastically detailing the Powel’s famous hospitality.

Dined at Mr. Powel’s with ...many others – a most sinful feast again!
Everything which could delight the eye or allure the taste. Curds and
Creams, Jellies, Sweet meats of various Sorts, 20 sorts of Tarts, fools,
Trifles, floating islands, whipp’d Sillabubs &c.&c.—Parmesan Cheese,
Punch, Wine, Porter, Beer &c.&c.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Dina Kanawati, Personal Communication, February 2007. At the time of her tour on March 24, 2006, Ms. Kanawati was a graduate student in the University of Pennsylvania’s Historic Preservation program conducting research for her thesis “Founding or Funding: Are Historic House Museums in Trouble?”

⁶⁶ Quote from John Adams’ letter home to his wife, Abigail, September 8, 1774, from the Powel House brochure for visitors. Until recently, Powel House held a “Sinful Feast” annually as a fundraising event.

Following the “sinful feast” at the Powels, Adams and a few others “tested their remaining sobriety” by climbing to the top of Christ Church steeple where they admired the view.⁶⁷ This is a boisterous side of our Founding Fathers we rarely hear about.

The Powel House is owned and managed by the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, which also includes Grumblethorpe, Physick House and Historic Waynesborough in its portfolio of historic properties.⁶⁸ Landmarks, as the organization is known, was founded in 1931 by Frances A. Wister who was making efforts to have the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects do an architectural survey of some of the oldest sections of the city near the Delaware River.⁶⁹ The Powel House, by then home to a factory that processed horsehair for brushes and weaving, was slated for demolition to make room for a parking lot. The paneling from two rooms had been removed and sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Wister’s single-minded efforts saved the building and Landmarks restored the interior architectural detail to its original Revolutionary era appearance.

The Powel House is open to the public only Thursdays through Sundays, a schedule far more limited than that of the Betsy Ross House. Visitation averages approximately 20-40 guests each weekend. The innovative Landmarks Contemporary Projects program creates new partnerships and expands the definition of historic house

⁶⁷ David W. Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830)*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006. p. 21

⁶⁸ “Annual Report 2004-2005” Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, p. 1

⁶⁹ Hosmer, p. 207

museum by using the backdrop of the house as a gallery setting for thought-provoking contemporary art installations.⁷⁰ The opening of a new exhibit regularly doubles visitation by attracting an audience of interested artists and art patrons.⁷¹

Landmarks has recently participated in an assessment review process as part of Heritage Philadelphia's Living Legacy Initiative which will help the Society define strategic direction and plan for a successful future. Landmarks and the Powel House undertake many initiatives related to fund raising, long-term planning, community engagement, and programming. The organization has a long history of innovation and forward thinking in Philadelphia's historic preservation movement. The following discussion is designed as a theoretical "makeover" of the current status of the house, but should in no way be interpreted as a criticism of current practices. The purpose of this study is to discuss how a historic house museum might initiate or rethink its communication practices, from interpretation and branding practices to competitive positioning and published materials.

First Impressions

The Powel House fits neatly into the row of brick residences that line Third Street, yet it is distinguished by its architectural detailing, street signage and flags. The entrance is slightly daunting, as one immediately has the sense of approaching a private

⁷⁰ Landmarks Contemporary Projects invites site-specific installations that may take the form of exhibitions, screenings, lectures, performances or educational programs. "By providing an experimental atmosphere in which artists are free to create new work and question basic assumptions of historical preservation, we hope to stimulate discourse and challenge accepted approaches to both house museums and contemporary culture." < <http://www.philalandmarks.org/projects.aspx>>

⁷¹ Michelle Wilson, Site Manager, The Powel House, Personal Communication, July 2007.

residence rather than a museum. For a visitor, this creates anticipation for access to a “private” space, yet it causes some hesitation when deciding whether one is expected to enter or ring a bell. More explicit or welcoming signage at the entrance would be helpful. The entry to the Powel House is dramatic and filled with remarkable architectural detail to take in, yet the potential of this moment of transition is not taken advantage of. A makeshift table staffed by art students blocks the way and the lighting is dim.

A welcoming guide stepped forward to ask if a tour was desired. She proceeded with a room by room tour which, while well-intentioned, ultimately does the house a disservice.

- Self-deprecation in the form of comments about the vast quantity of other period homes in the area are inappropriate. The guest should be made to feel fortunate that they have the opportunity to be in one of the very best historic Colonial houses that Philadelphia offers.
- The “architecture and object” tour⁷² misses the mark in Powel House. The site doesn’t have a large collection and the building lost some of its architectural integrity when the interiors were sold to museums and recreated in the early 20th century. There is a more compelling story to be told here beyond Mr. Powel’s knife boxes, the Chippendale chairs, the symmetrical balance of the real and false door in the front parlor, and which of the door hardware is original to the house.

⁷² Historic New England’s Carl Nold advises that the average visitor can’t relate and doesn’t care about the “architecture and object tour” which he dismisses as a Victorian tour model. Consider the visitor and be willing to experiment, he suggests.

- At the time of the visit, Landmarks Contemporary Projects featured an installation by Roxanna Perez-Mendez called “La Declaracion” that “presents fictions mixed with facts” and “helps elucidate the fact that [history] is already obscured.”⁷³ The guide only explained this was an exhibit now in place, but could offer no context that would help understand or appreciate the installation.⁷⁴ Lacking the core concept, the visitor was unable to be provoked by the ideas and instead was left wondering why these intrusive objects, videos, and sounds were in place. The installation, instead of amplifying the visit and ideas about history, became a separate layer instead of an integrated part of the story of the house.
- There is little signage in place⁷⁵ that would easily serve a self-guided tour or encourage participatory self-exploration on a guided tour, though the broadsheet brochure for the house does give copious amounts of textual information highlighting key features in each room.
- One of the key interpretive stories of The Powel House is its rescue from demolition by Frances Wister and the founding of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, yet photos that show the house in its “before” state are relegated to a back hallway and provided with inadequate labeling for

⁷³ Brochure for “La Declaracion” by Roxanna Perez-Mendez, appearing March 1 – April 1 2007, Landmarks Contemporary Projects, Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks

⁷⁴ A brochure for the exhibit was available on a table in the front hall, but the likelihood of a guest stopping to read it all while engaged in a tour is unlikely. Guides should be prepared to offer a variation of the same information verbally.

⁷⁵ Signage referring not to labels for individual items within the room, but larger scale narrative signage that provides the overview of “the story,” allows several visitors to read it at once, and engages them on a personal level in experiencing the room.

the visitor to truly understand the scope of the preservation work that was undertaken at this site.

- The guide failed to engage the imagination of a six year old visitor, who then became a distraction to other guests.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Philadelphia is fortunate to have the “Once Upon a Nation” program which features 13 storytelling benches in various locations around Independence Hall. Each storyteller is trained to customize their presentation based on the interests of the listeners. If children are present, a story is chosen that will engage their imaginations and permit interaction.



Figure 1: Many visitors overlook the actual Betsy Ross House, drawn instead to the activity in the bunting-festooned courtyard.



Figure 2: The busy courtyard of the Betsy Ross House leads to the gift shop and house tour entrance



Figure 3: The gift shop at the Betsy Ross House offers a more welcoming environment than the house itself.



Figure 4: The facade of the Samuel and Elizabeth Powel House faces Third Street



Figure 5: The impressive entrance of the Samuel and Elizabeth Powel House. The visitor has the impression of visiting a private residence; only a small sign above the doorbell says “Please ring”



Figure 6: Entrance hall of the Samuel and Elizabeth Powel House



Figure 7: The second floor ballroom of the Samuel and Elizabeth Powel House

The Powel House: New Understanding, New Opportunities

Understand the Competitive Environment

Reimagining the Powel House begins with understanding the competitive conditions of the area in both regional terms and the more immediate neighborhood. The Philadelphia region is culturally a resource-rich environment with a vibrant performing arts sector, a dynamic collection of museums for all interests, and a national reputation for its historic resources. That reputation draws tourists who are predisposed to visit Independence Hall and other sites in the vicinity, like the Powel House.

Increased visibility and visitation for the Powel House will come from differentiating itself from the vast number of attractions competing for these same tourists. If one follows the counsel of the museum advocates who advise museum professionals to see our sites from the visitor's point of view, then one must consider at what point a tourist reaches capacity in their interest in visiting another brick building related to Colonial history. The Powel House needs to employ every possible opportunity to create a new identity, new partnerships, and new messages for the general public.

Evaluate the Identity

Initially, Landmarks might consider focusing on building stronger brand identity for itself as an organization. Its long history in historic preservation, depth of educational offerings, and commitment to innovation and exploring new possibilities for historic sites

should make it an easily recognized leader in the area. Landmarks' programs include Elderhostel tours, Landmark walking tours, the Landmarks Contemporary Projects program, school programs, and the portfolio of four historic homes which are available for rental and special events.

Landmarks currently seems too entrenched in the "Colonial Brick" concept that defines so many of the area's attractions and it should consider creating a more contemporary image that would differentiate the house and reflect the organization's forward-thinking attitudes.

Although it is a drastic option, the organization might want to consider a name change, or simplification, possibly from The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks to the name they already use informally: Philadelphia Landmarks. In Boston, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, with a history dating back to 1910, chose to change its name in the 21st century to Historic New England. The new name already had some connection with the organization, in use as the name of its magazine publication. With a new commitment to making New England history more accessible to contemporary audiences, the original name was simply deemed too out of date.⁷⁷

Regarding the Powel House specifically, despite its origins and Colonial significance, in order to provide a new, more effective communication base, it must refresh its image and create new partnerships. The publication currently most identified with the house is the brochure given to visitors. This brochure is a single-paged,

⁷⁷ Susanna Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, Personal Communication, July 2007

oversized broadsheet colored off-white to suggest a historical document. The name of the house is in wavy ink calligraphy across the top, with the name of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks beneath it as a subheading. Recreating the effect of 18th century hand-written documents, certain words are printed in all uppercase, to highlight aspects of the house. Floor plans for the first and second floor are included, though unnecessary. The images chosen for inclusion (the mortgage button in the newel post and a 1941 whisky ad, for instance) aren't sufficient to support and illustrate the remarkable story of the house and its occupants. The text is a summary of the "architecture and object" tour, with a brief introduction about the history of the house, the Powells, and the preservation efforts of Miss Frances Wister.

To reinvent the tour materials, one must again look at the experience as a visitor would. What will their interests be? Some visitors may be interested only in a cursory experience, with the highlights pointed out to them before they are ready to depart and head to the next site on their agenda for the day. Other visitors might be more willing to spend time and engage with the building and its stories. They will want to know more about the people who have been involved with the house over time and the history of the building as it moves along the timeline from Colonial mansion to condemned horsehair factory. The following collection of publications would effectively meet the needs of a variety of visitors.

- All-purpose house tour flyer. An inexpensive sheet that can be given freely to all visitors will be easy to read and digest while standing in the hallway and

moving through the various rooms. Illustrations will clearly support and elucidate the main “stories” or themes presented in the flyer.

- Children’s activity sheet. Visitors with children will appreciate an activity sheet that will engage young minds in the story and provide a distraction that allows their parents to enjoy the tour/house. Very young children might enjoy a scavenger hunt sheet that employs pictures of objects to be found and doesn’t rely on reading skills. Certain “surprises” might be hidden in rooms, such as a small mouse painted on the baseboard.⁷⁸ A partnership possibility would take the form of a “passport” of some kind developed with other area sites, which would encourage children and their families to visit each house, perform a certain activity and receive a stamp of achievement.⁷⁹ The Powel House might stage an activity in the garden with a back up activity for rainy days.⁸⁰
- Full-color illustrated booklet. Visitors should have the opportunity to access the fuller and more complete story of the Powel House and those connected with it. A full-color illustrated guide serves a dual purpose: it serves as

⁷⁸ Children’s material might also include suggested resources for more information, such as Robert Lawson’s classic book *Ben & Me*, which tells the story of Benjamin Franklin through the eyes of a mouse who lived in his house. Selected items could be made available in the gift shop area of the house.

⁷⁹ Historic Philadelphia’s “Once Upon a Nation” program of 13 storyteller benches gives each child a 13-colony paper flag stapled to a paint stick advertising Home Depot. As the child visits each bench, he or she receives a star sticker to put on the flag. This object motivates the children to visit all the benches to complete the circle of stars on their flag.

⁸⁰ Children on house and history tours will appreciate an opportunity to be physical. At the Mill at Anselma, numerous stations on the site involve children in corn shelling, feeding the kernels into the grinding stones, turning a waterwheel to understand the process, and sifting shells out of newly ground flour. In a recent weekend, the children shelled nearly 150 lbs of corn. These activities provide a photo opportunity for parents, and when they show the pictures to friends and relatives at a later date, it helps spread awareness about the site to new audiences.

information for the guest while they are at the house and is an excellent souvenir that will be taken home and shared with others, thus spreading awareness of the house. Historic homes in England regularly offer such booklets, beautifully illustrated, for a small fee in addition to the admission cost. A partnership opportunity exists in that purchase of the guide might include a coupon that offers a percentage off admission or a free audio tour at another site.

- A map and guide to the neighborhood. In addition to placing the Powel House in a neighborhood and community context, this creates numerous partnership opportunities that range from other nearby historic sites to local restaurants and retailers.⁸¹
- A modern-looking and appealing brochure from Philadelphia Landmarks that explains its mission, summarizes its offerings in terms of walking tours, etc. and then features a page for each of the four Landmark houses, each with their own distinct identity under the Landmarks umbrella.

Publications are one of the chief opportunities to convey image and build brand identity and awareness. To give the Powel House its own individual identity and distinguish it from the numerous other historic sites in the area, the design should be

⁸¹ Currently, an excellent map and overview to historic attractions that are located within walking distance of the Liberty Bell is available that includes the Powel House. The map was created and produced by Philadelphia's Historic Neighborhood Consortium which is an association of more than 30 sites including cultural institutions, libraries, museums, historic sites and historic places of worship.

modern and contemporary and include identification as a Philadelphia Landmarks property. The Powel House interior color scheme provides obvious color choices for a new logo specific to the house itself. Of particular interest is the color green on the dining room walls which was selected by Samuel Powel because the hue was said to aid in digestion. When George Washington visited the house, he admired the color so much that he used it at Mount Vernon.⁸²

Evaluate the Interpretation

As previously discussed, historic house museums must make more effort to consider their presentation from the visitor's point of view. If the "architecture and object tour is outmoded, then what are the compelling stories and how should they be told? How can the interpretation support broader communication objectives?

At the Powel House, the answer is provided by an intriguing publication for sale in the gift shop, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, 1743-1830*, by David W. Maxey. In the book, Maxey uses four portraits of Elizabeth Powel to tell her story. The first was a miniature painted before her marriage around 1760 and the last is a portrait by Frances Alexander circa 1825.

Recreating this story using the Powel House as a backdrop allows the guest to move through time and space, using one portrait featured in each room to represent a particular stage in her life. Instantly we have shifted the visitor experience from

⁸² A married couple touring the Powel House recognized the vibrant color from a visit to Mount Vernon and asked the guide if Powel had copied it. They were surprised to hear that Powel was the original inspiration.

Nanking China and door hardware to understanding the life of Elizabeth Powel and her role in history. This interpretive story is an obvious companion to that of Betsy Ross, whose modest lifestyle working to support her large family is in direct contrast to Elizabeth Powel, who, while wealthy and in society with the nation's leaders, lost both her children in infancy and her husband to the yellow fever epidemic. Featuring Elizabeth Powel's story fulfills a need by elevating another woman's story into the Founding Father tradition.

Elizabeth Powel was a complex, sophisticated and spirited woman who enjoyed talking about politics, an activity women of her time were not supposed to engage in.

Elizabeth Powel repeatedly violated a cautionary precept of salonnières and bluestockings alike – by failing to avoid politics as a subject incompatible with refined conversation. She was incapable of withholding her opinion on the direction in which she saw her country moving, or on the competence of the leading figures in public life.⁸³

While a favorite topic was “how women might receive their due in a male-dominated society,”⁸⁴ her own wealth and position meant she entertained and had access to some of the most important men in the country, including George Washington who was a trusted confidant. Elizabeth Powel kept handwritten copies of each piece of her correspondence that survive to this day and comprise a compelling source of primary material. A seven-page letter she wrote to George Washington, in which she said “at this time, you are the only Man in America that dares to do right on all Occasions,” is said to

⁸³ David W. Maxey. *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, 1743-1830*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006. p. 29

⁸⁴ David W. Maxey. *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, 1743-1830*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006. p. 27

have been what finally convinced him not to resign from the presidency after his first term ended in November of 1792.⁸⁵

Elizabeth Powel's correspondence shows that time may pass but some things stay the same. A letter to her sister suggests a typical domestic scene of any time period in which the wife and husband argue over something of no seeming importance. In the letter, she describes "spasms and pains in my Head" which she blames on her husband's fondness for large fires in the fireplace, but which he simply dismisses as her "bad Nerves."⁸⁶

The tour might end looking at the portrait of Elizabeth Powel dressed in mourning attire in the second floor's Withdrawing Room. While she was still an active, if unofficial, advisor to George Washington until his death, she worried at the end of her life about whether or not she had made enough of a contribution to the world.

If women's history were to become a focal point of the Powel House, then sub-themes emerge, including the story of Frances Wister, whose drive and single-mindedness led to the founding of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in 1931 in order to save the Powel House from demolition. She was able to raise enough money in the midst of the Depression to purchase and preserve the house for future generations. With her influential women friends and members of the Society, she worked to restore the house to its appearance during the time of the American

⁸⁵ David W. Maxey. *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, 1743-1830*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006. p. 31

⁸⁶ David W. Maxey. *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, 1743-1830*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2006. p. 25

Revolution. This is one of the important stories from the early history of the historic preservation movement and a lesson in commitment and purpose. It relates to the present in that the early portion of both the 20th and 21st-centuries find our nation coping with insecurities over war, immigration, the economy, and our nation's future. One of the motivations of historic preservation in its infancy was to find some stability in a changing world.

Create New Opportunities

What opportunities would this new theme create? The interpretation of the house provides the foundation upon which all other communication efforts build, and the interpretation ought to derive from the strategic plan and mission. Once a site has taken an objective look at the visitor experience, gotten feedback from a range of guests after their tour, and analyzed whether the current interpretation is connecting the past with the present, it may decide to shift the story or the way it is presented. In brainstorming new ideas a site might want to include individuals with some distance and perspective as well as internal staff or board members. While it is always said that "there are no bad ideas" in brainstorming sessions, ultimately each must be evaluated against the strategic plan. A brainstorming session for an interpretive shift that focuses on Elizabeth Powel rather than her husband, "the Patriot Mayor," might produce some of the following concepts:

- Potential partnerships with sites such as the Betsy Ross House, the President's House on Sixth Street in Philadelphia and George Washington's house, Mount Vernon (which owns the Powel's china service and carriage). The Betsy Ross

connection has been discussed. The Powels shared a close friendship with Martha and George Washington and the experience at each of these sites could be enhanced by a greater understanding of the personal side of these leading citizens of the day.

- The second floor ballroom is a challenging space to interpret as its interior is a 20th century recreation and it lacks a furnishings collection.⁸⁷ The room needs a focal point and offers a wonderful opportunity for a creative, theatrical interpretation of an actual Powel House event, like George Washington's birthday party, described by Benjamin Franklin's daughter, Sally, in a letter to him. Visitors might enter a darkened room, recreating what period nighttime lighting would have been like. Figurative silhouettes might crowd the room to recreate a social gathering of the period. As certain portions of the room brighten in turn, the visitor overhears conversations based on documentary material. Elizabeth Powel might be shown talking to George Washington which leads to the guide's engaging presentation of what an energetic and opinionated woman Mrs. Powel was, the roles and restrictions for women of that period, and specific highlights of this period of her life.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ On the tour, the guide seemed to apologize for the lack of furnishings in the room. She indicated that the original paneling had been sold to a museum (but couldn't recall which one). This might have been the opportunity to tell the in-depth story of Frances Wister, the preservation of the house and the founding of the Society for the Preservation of Philadelphia Landmarks (enhancing its reputation and reminding the visitor of the house's link to the organization).

⁸⁸ This is the kind of idea that a historic house museum might dismiss, immediately assuming lack of expertise and budget. If an idea makes sense against the strategic plan and mission, then look for creative solutions to challenges. In this instance the theatre department of a local college or university might need a class project that might be a draft of a concept for the space, or might include production of some of the

- George Washington's birthday was February 21 and Elizabeth Powel's was February 22 suggesting the opportunity for a series of events co-sponsored by the President's House and the Powel House for the month of February. These might range from discussion of the history of women in politics to an entertaining annual event fundraiser that would provide opportunities for media coverage (e.g. a Powdered Wig 3K Race, presentation of a "President's Award" for political reform at the Powel Gala, etc.).
- A book based on Elizabeth Powel's letters and placing her life story in the historical context of a woman's life in that period. This would be an obvious item to have on sale in the gift shop.
- National Women's History Month in March provides an opportunity for special events such as American Girl doll tea parties, lectures, a presentation of a fictional meeting of Betsy Ross and Elizabeth Powell highlighting the similarities and differences in their lives, sponsorship of schoolchild essay or poster contests, etc. The 2008 theme for Women's History Month is "Women's Art: Women's Vision" which could be a rich topic for the Powel House and the Landmarks Contemporary Project. What if Elizabeth Powell had been an artist? What might her vision have been? Using her portraits as a springboard, mount an exhibition and competition of artwork that answers the question.

props for the space. Challenges are often opportunities for community outreach and the forging of new partnerships that serve both organizations in the long run.

- Tie-in with local women’s groups, university classes on women’s history, Girl Scout troops and other women’s organizations to use the house for meetings or special events. Offer a speaker’s bureau to these organizations that offers a list of speaker and topics. The clubs work through the Powel House to reserve the site and arrange for a special club-sponsored event at the house.
- Elizabeth Powel was passionate about politics. The Powel House was formerly the home of the mayor of Philadelphia. Invite the current city government administration to use the facility for special events, small dinners, or photo opportunities.
- The Powel House is already available for catered functions, so adding additional food service would not be detrimental to the character of the site. The rear garden would be an ideal location to host regular (iced) “tea parties” in the summers. Tourists in need of rest and refreshment would welcome the opportunity to experience a modern version of the Powel’s hospitality and this would provide additional income for the site.⁸⁹

With a provocative theme to work with, the possibilities are virtually endless.

The challenge for most historic house museums is that their resources are limited.

⁸⁹ Many individuals trace their interest in history or architecture to childhood experiences. In fact, the authors of *Listening in on Museum Conversations* use their preface to share their early experiences. One of my own formative memories were childhood visits to Jefferds’ Tavern in York, Maine, where ladies in Colonial attire served us mulled cider or tea and warm cinnamon toast. The Powel House garden could become a site where mothers and daughters share “tea,” where girls come to special American Girl doll events, or where groups of young girls don costumes for a Colonial-themed birthday party.

However, since one of the strategic goals for any house museum must include giving up insularity for community involvement, limited resources are a good reason to reach out to the community, create new partnerships and spread awareness of the site. A representative of the National Trust for Historic Preservation speaking at a conference in 1998 emphasized the critical importance of partnerships to the survival of house museums.

Too many house museums operate in isolation, both from each other and from preservation activities in their communities. There is no doubt that the demands of operating a house museum are enormous, but time as got to be found to get out into the community. For many smaller house museums, even partnerships with other sites linked by proximity or themes can automatically expand their programming, involvement and diversity.⁹⁰

To address some of the issues connected with limited resources and to encourage site managers to think creatively, an appendix with a toolkit of ideas may be found at the end of this material. The following chapter offers a series of case studies that show how a variety of sites have managed their communications challenges and opportunities.

⁹⁰ Frank E. Sanchis, III, Vice President, Stewardship of Historic Sites, National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Looking Back or Looking Forward? House Museums in the 21st Century." An Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium, December 4-5, 1998.

Chapter Three: Best Practices

Examples from the Field: Communications Opportunities and Challenges

Communications outreach does not require a site to undertake a massive campaign at once. Often the objective is simply to build awareness slowly, at the same time that one builds capacity. With limited resources, a site can't do everything, but the second thing builds on the first and so on, just as one visitor having a positive tour experience at a site leads to positive word of mouth, which leads to increased visitation.⁹¹ Each effort builds experience and each experience informs the next project.

Mark Stern and Linda Seifert proffer an intriguing concept of “the creative economy,” which fosters connection through things like food co-ops, arts collaboratives and other, locally-focused cultural and arts offerings.⁹² These institutions, they suggest, often define a community and become the fabric that holds diverse populations together.

Historic sites in the 21st century have a tremendous opportunity to become leaders in supporting their communities, if and when they choose to become connected. They will benefit as an institution just as the community will benefit from their perspective and resource offerings.

⁹¹ Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia offers all residents in a ten block radius of the site free passes. A site like the Powel House might consider including special resident passes in Society Hill Welcome Wagon baskets. The passes might also include admission to the nearby companion site, the Physick House.

⁹² Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, “From Creative Economy to Creative Society,” *Progressive Planning*, No. 170, Winter 2007.

Each of the following case studies has a different point of view or means of accomplishing the challenge they faced, yet in all of them one sees the importance of that community link underpinning each of their actions and decisions. Ultimately, it is the community who is the audience for the site and without understanding, engaging and serving them, a historic house museum might as well return to private ownership.

Each of these sites is at a different stage in their process of connecting – or reconnecting with the public, but each example offers a valuable lesson.

Boxwood Hall in Elizabeth, New Jersey, is a well-established, state-owned site related to New Jersey's colonial history. The surrounding urban environment is experiencing dramatic changes in population and the site needs to find a way to reconnect its history or function with the community.

In contrast, The Mill at Anselma located in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania, has been operational as a historic site for a relatively brief period of time, but much of its remarkable success may be traced to involving the local community in its planning processes from the outset and its reliance on a strategic plan to help focus and guide its actions.

Mature sites can reinvent themselves and attract new audiences. Using an irreverent and creative approach to branding and programming, Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia has been able to shift perception of the site and appeal to new audiences.

Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia has transformed from a crumbling former prison to a tourist magnet using a masterful marketing mix of engaging programming, branding, special events, and media relations.

Boxwood Hall, Elizabeth, New Jersey: Seeking Relevance

Boxwood Hall is a state-owned property facing numerous challenges common to many historic sites today, especially those that have outlived the patriotic fervor that preserved and transformed them into house museums.

Built around 1750, the house is interpreted to the occupancy of second owner Elias Boudinot (1740-1821) who bought Boxwood Hall in 1772 and owned it until 1795 when he sold it to Jonathan Dayton, the youngest signer of the Constitution.⁹³ Boudinot was a United States Representative and President of the Continental Congress in 1782. Boudinot had frequently entertained the young Alexander Hamilton at the house, and received George Washington there while enroute to his inauguration in New York City in 1789.⁹⁴

The establishment of Boxwood Hall as an historic site followed a pattern familiar in the United States. Threatened with demolition in the 1930s, The Boxwood Hall Memorial Association raised funds by popular subscription to purchase the property in 1940 and deeded it to the State of New Jersey in 1941.⁹⁵ The house was listed as a

⁹³ S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *National Landmarks, America's Treasures*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000. p. 285, also National Park Service, National Historic Landmarks database <<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=946&ResourceType=Building>>

⁹⁴ S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *National Landmarks, America's Treasures*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000. p. 285, also National Park Service, National Historic Landmarks database <<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=946&ResourceType=Building>>

⁹⁵ National Park Service website <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/constitution/site14.htm>

National Historic Landmark in 1972 because of its architectural merit and links to 18th-century historical events and individuals.⁹⁶

Boxwood Hall is located in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a settlement founded in 1665 and the first capital of the state of New Jersey. It was central to the development of transportation and industry in the state during the 19th century and today ranks as New Jersey's fourth largest city, home to the largest industrial seaport in North America and the Newark/Elizabeth Liberty International Airport.⁹⁷

Today, Elizabeth is gaining population through an influx of non-native immigrants; in fact, the 2000 Census indicates that 56% of Elizabeth's population is native-born and 43.9% are foreign-born. Of the latter, 75% come from Latin America.⁹⁸ The diverse population represents more than 50 countries and 37 different language groups.⁹⁹ In fact, 67% of Elizabeth residents speak a language other than English in their homes.¹⁰⁰

This diversity of population and cultural backgrounds presents a challenge. These immigrant communities are not connected through tradition or culture to American founding fathers. In a sense, Boxwood Hall has outlived the patriotic fervor that preserved and transformed it into a museum. How does it have relevance today? What is

⁹⁶ United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *National Historic Landmarks Survey: List of National Historic Landmarks by State*. May 2004.

⁹⁷ Office of the Mayor, Elizabeth, New Jersey, <<http://www.elizabethnj.org/facts.html>>

⁹⁸ United States Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File, <http://www.elizabethnj.org/census_info.html>

⁹⁹ Office of the Mayor, Elizabeth, New Jersey, <<http://www.elizabethnj.org/facts.html>>

¹⁰⁰ United States Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File, <http://www.elizabethnj.org/census_info.html>

its modern purpose and meaning? How does it find new meaning and connection to a diverse community with varied cultural backgrounds?

Like many historic sites, Boxwood Hall lacks the resources and staff to undertake the sort of research and strategic planning to develop methods to meet these challenges. The Preservation Assistance Office in the Northeast Regional Office of the National Park Service, in collaboration with the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office, identified Boxwood Hall as representative of many similar sites around the country that find themselves surrounded by and disconnected from their urban environment and population.¹⁰¹

The National Park Service approached Executive Director, Katherine Craig, with a proposal to use the site as a study model. Planning began for a facilitated discussion that would explore methods “to promote public interest in valuing and preserving historic sites in rapidly changing and ethnically diverse communities.”¹⁰² Boxwood Hall invited local community leaders to visit the site, to share ideas, and to offer valuable feedback about community issues and interests. “By bringing fresh perspectives into the discussion about the relevancy of the site,” the National Park Service representative stated, “we hope that this project will create new outreach techniques, educational programs, and perhaps a toolkit to serve as a prototype for other historic sites.”¹⁰³

The invitation list included local community activists, a representative from the Mayor’s office, the director of the local cultural heritage program, pastors from nearby

¹⁰¹ Catherine Turton, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, January 2007

¹⁰² Boxwood Hall letter of invitation provided by Bonnie Halda, National Park Service, September 2006

¹⁰³ Boxwood Hall letter of invitation provided by Bonnie Halda, National Park Service, September 2006

churches, an architect, the director of the local chamber of commerce and chair of the planning board, an aide from the State Senator's office and the city's director of planning and development.¹⁰⁴ For several of the attendees, the meeting represented their first visits to Boxwood Hall. They were given an introduction to the history of the site and then invited to share their connections or opinions of the house before moving on to what the site means to the community and what its potential might be.¹⁰⁵

This moment represents a new opportunity for Boxwood Hall. David Carr explains the opportunities that cultural institutions have to provoke thought and create community.

In our local institutions we touch and illuminate each other as we exchange information, because the table of our community is so small. When we sit around that table and present ourselves to each other,...we are more than ourselves alone. Some part of democratic structures must always say to each life: This is a form of constructive trust of which we all are capable. We understand our community best by understanding what it wants to have happen, for itself and for all its citizens; by what it keeps, from generation to generation; and by how freely knowledge is shared as a community possession.¹⁰⁶

Today Boxwood Hall is beginning the process of reconnecting to the community. It has taken the very important first step of reaching out to opinion leaders and inviting them to become participants in developing the form and meaning that reconnection should take. Boxwood Hall may decide to work with the school across the street to use its structure as a tangible means of exploring the past. It may develop a connection with

¹⁰⁴ List of attendees, provided by Catherine Turton, National Park Service

¹⁰⁵ Bonnie Halda, National Park Service, January 2007

¹⁰⁶ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2003. p. 205

the church around the corner, perhaps engaging in some larger social causes that the site's history exemplifies and which has relevance to today's local residents. It could create community goodwill by becoming a meeting hub for the numerous local organizations that currently lack facilities. It may do something as simple as staffing a booth at the numerous ethnic festivals held in Elizabeth throughout the year to build awareness and connection among diverse local populations.¹⁰⁷

Civic engagement may be an important part of the site's reconnection with the community. The site can serve as a touchstone for important issues affecting all of us in the 21st century. Citing opportunities that Boxwood Hall offers in particular – relating to “the authentic,” and serving as a touchstone for human experience and integrity -- David Carr inspires optimism for the future and explains

We turn to the authentic, for strength and energy; to lived lives and living experiences, for evidences of human integrity; and, to the mirror of our own questions, we turn to see that *who we are* allows us to imagine *who we might yet become*. Ultimately, we turn to these things in order to turn toward each other.¹⁰⁸

Of primary significance is that the first step has been taken to reconnect the site to the community by inviting the community to participate in the process. Boxwood Hall will host additional meetings with different groups; those meetings may result in new ideas and observations, all of which will contribute to the development of a final plan that will give Boxwood Hall new relevance in the 21st century.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Turton, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, January 2007

¹⁰⁸ David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2003. p. 206

Lessons

Seek help

Supportive partnerships with outside groups can be extraordinarily helpful for any struggling nonprofit. A local corporation might be willing to provide volunteers, marketing expertise, photocopying services, or even a donation of seed money or matching funds for a community-based project. Services a school might offer could range from spring landscaping clean up to envelope stuffing or research as part of a class project. An exceptional example of this type of partnership is offered by the San Francisco Opera whose “Silicon Valley Initiative” to increase attendance and financial support from that location was headed by the Harvard Business School Community Partners program. The Community Partners program encourages alumni with management and business skills to serve as volunteer consultants in the local nonprofit sector. The Community Partners team did the research and data analysis necessary to develop new marketing and development programs that would achieve the desired goals for the opera company.¹⁰⁹

Seek support

Local officials are the leaders of the community. If you seek community connection, you must be sure to keep them informed of your existence and activities.

Seek publicity

¹⁰⁹ Harvard Business School, “San Francisco Opera” case study 9-300-095, Harvard Business School Publishing, April 14, 2000.

Boxwood Hall might have taken the additional step of contacting local media outlets with a brief news item and group photograph highlighting the fact that important local community leaders, including a representative of the Mayor's office, gathered at the site to discuss cultural diversity and historic sites.

The Mill at Anselma Preservation and Educational Trust, Inc., Chester Springs, Pennsylvania: Establishing Community Ownership

The Mill at Anselma is a National Historic Landmark located in Chester County, approximately 33 miles from Philadelphia. At the end of the 1990s, the site was simply a picturesque but lifeless assembly of buildings evoking the long-ago rural industrial history of the area. The landscape was overgrown, the mill's waterwheel was missing, and restoration work was needed on the various structures. Today, just over a decade later, visitors can observe a functioning waterwheel power the complicated machinery that produces the mill's stone-ground flour and corn meal. In 2006, the Mill held a National Historic Landmark dedication ceremony, inviting local officials, community leaders, and neighbors to the celebration.¹¹⁰

The turnaround from conservation landscape to operating mill and historic site began in 1998 with the formation of the Mill at Anselma Preservation and Educational Trust, which incorporated the original French and Pickering Creek Conservation Trust that had purchased the land and stabilized the buildings in the 1980s.¹¹¹ Early on, the Mill Trust recognized the need for a broad-based "community ownership" model that would support the mill in its fledgling years.¹¹² The Trust gained the important support of local officials, including the Board of Supervisors of West Pikeland Township and the Board of Commissioners of Chester County.

¹¹⁰ Bill Bolger, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, Personal Communication

¹¹¹ The Mill at Anselma Preservation and Educational Trust, Inc., Informational Brochure

¹¹² Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

The site developed a long range Master Plan, and, later an Interpretive Plan (funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts) and involved the local community by establishing a Community Advisory Council made up of 30 individuals representing the township, tourism interests, local area businesses, and other nonprofit and/or community organizations. These busy individuals created an important network of early support and were a guiding force throughout the process of the mill restoration effort and in shaping the mill's long-range plans.¹¹³

Executive Director Heather Reiffer explained that none of those involved had prior experience restoring or operating a 250-year old mill and there was a significant learning curve while deciding what needed to be done and how to best do it. Staff, advisory council, and the board of directors all vowed to honor the site's vast potential by keeping open minds, employing creative approaches wherever possible, and continuing to make community involvement a top priority.¹¹⁴

The site achieved National Historic Landmark status in 2005 and shared the honor with the community at the April 2006 season-opening festivities during which the plaque was unveiled.¹¹⁵ The mill took the opportunity to publically recognize and honor those who supported the mill's initial phases of development, including government officials

¹¹³ Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

¹¹⁴ Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

¹¹⁵ Bill Bolger, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, Personal Communication

and the descendants of families who had lived and worked the mill throughout its long history.¹¹⁶

The interpretive experience at the site is the foundation of the communications plan and the mill's contact with the community it serves. Interpretation has developed over the last several years based on experience, input based on observation and talking to visitors about their experience, and the mill's commitment to creativity and being a community partner.¹¹⁷

The Mill at Anselma is dedicated to making the experience about the visitor and is part of its mission statement.

The Mill at Anselma, a National Historic Landmark, inspires people in creative ways to discover its authentic technology and importance to the community over three centuries of operation.¹¹⁸

Rather than a formal tour, visitors prefer engaging the mill and its workings on their own terms. As a result, volunteers (there was a conscious decision to avoid labels like "docent" or "guide" that seemed off-putting in the mill context¹¹⁹) wait at five stations on the property to impart information and answer questions. Reiffer reports that

¹¹⁶ Bill Bolger, National Park Service, informed me of the dedication ceremony because of a family-related connection to the area's mill history; my great-grandfather, Thomas White, operated a grain mill and sawmill in Tylersport from 1898 until his death in 1935.

¹¹⁷ Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication.

¹¹⁸ 2007-2009 Strategic Plan for the Mill at Anselma, provided by Dave Rollenhagen, Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees and Master Miller, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

¹¹⁹ Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

this open-ended experience has resulted in longer guest visits and greater satisfaction with the mill experience.¹²⁰

Positive word-of-mouth and ongoing efforts to create a family-friendly experience has resulted in a distinct change in visitation, according to Reiffer. In the last few years visitation has completely shifted from being mostly seniors to a very heavy emphasis on families. This is no doubt due to the increasingly interactive nature of the exhibit and the opportunity for children to explore the surrounding landscape. The mill pond is filled with tadpoles, frogs, and fish and a path leads into the woods toward a larger natural area at the back of the property. At the mill site, child-friendly models at each stage of the milling process allow hands-on interaction. On a recent “grinding” weekend, children fed approximately 150 pounds of corn into a vintage corn sheller, and then poured the kernels into the chute that feeds the grinding stones.¹²¹ Outside the doorway to the huge turning waterwheel is a smaller model for children to crank to understand how the mechanism works. Outside the lower level of the mill at the final milling stage is a sifter that children use to remove debris from the finished flour.

Just as visitor numbers have grown, so have volunteers, rising from five or six in the early years to a passionate group of 20. When the emphasis was on the mill mechanics and engineering, volunteers were only men, but now that the mill is able to

¹²⁰ The staff and volunteers observe guest behavior and make a point of asking people about their visitor experience; the information is shared at staff meetings. Additionally, visitors are often so enthusiastic about the experience that they share their thoughts without being asked. Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

¹²¹ Dave Rollenhagen, The Mill at Anselma, Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees and Master Miller, Personal Communication with David G. Smith, who donated the corn sheller.

sell its flour and corn meal products, more women are becoming involved, helping to tell the story of food staples with recipes and baking demonstrations.¹²²

Reiffer readily admits that the site has not done enough media relations but the recently adopted five-year strategic plan has a strong commitment to increasing external communications efforts, including the goal of additional staff. In the past, the mill has issued press releases about upcoming events to local and regional media and enjoys the support of a local private school that distributes notice of mill events to families. The following goals from the strategic plan reflect the mill's continued dedication to community involvement and ownership of the site.¹²³

- Build long-term relationships with target audiences in order to increase visitor attendance and community ownership. These audiences include the local community and local businesses, heritage tourists, tourist development agencies and officials, and staff at the Schuylkill River Heritage area, teachers and students of all ages, youth groups, senior groups, adult education programs, and mill or agricultural-related societies.
- Enlist a consultant with experience to develop a public relations and marketing plan that highlights the Mill as a National Historic Landmark, a vital heritage destination, and a vital community resource. Increase communications outreach, including paid advertising, publicity, plus

¹²² Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

¹²³ These goals are taken from the Mill at Anselma's 2007-2009 Strategic Plan, provided by Dave Rollenhagen, Vice-Chair, Board of Trustees and Master Miller, The Mill at Anselma.

improvement of the web site and newsletter, adding emphasis to promotion of Mill programs, membership and flour sales.

- Cooperate with the local Chester Spring Area Collaborative to develop a regional brand identity, including marketing research, development of a marketing plan, development of a fall special event, and small-scale collaborations with other area organizations.

Lessons

Reach out

Whether a site is just getting started, or has been established for decades, there must be an emphasis on community involvement. Inform local government officials and leaders of civic organizations about plans for your site. Keep local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and schools updated on upcoming activities. Host an open house, add visitors to the newsletter mailing or email list, or make the site available to local groups to hold meetings or special events. These efforts will help build awareness and long-term support.

Be grateful

Wherever and whenever possible, take the opportunity to thank supporters -- in newsletters or at special events, with awards or a simple verbal acknowledgement at meetings.

Be aware

Listen to community and visitor feedback and adjust interpretation or how visitors interact with the site as needed. Potential changes may be as simple as the term designating guides, or more complex, involving a more interactive tour to more effectively engage visitors with the site.

Making profit

Think about what you might sell;¹²⁴ profits from Anselma's flour and cornmeal products are steadily increasing to the point that they now provide real income for the site.¹²⁵ Recipe books and related goods are logical next steps. Baked goods using Anselma flour have been sold at special events with large visitor turn out.

Ages and Stages

How can you engage all levels of visitors? At the mill entrance, a child-oriented flyer offers information about the mill on one side while a scavenger hunt on the other side challenges them to find each of the pictured objects. On site, children can look for frogs in the mill pond and hand crank a machine that demonstrates how water power works. Interactive models or activities are provided at each of the main stages of the mill

¹²⁴ Margot Wallace discusses gift shop sales on site and online in *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty, and Support* (2006). Sites should make an effort to have products relate back to the site itself.

¹²⁵ Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, Personal Communication

tour. Parents will take photographs of children using these models that they will share with others, thus spreading awareness of the site to potential new visitors.

Strategic planning

Quite often historic sites do not have well-defined mission statements, strategic plans, or interpretive plans.¹²⁶ These plans are the guiding lights for a site's actions and existence and it is too easy to stray into unknown territory without them. A clear focus helps guide interpretation, acquisition, and planning.¹²⁷

Board of Directors

Leadership is important to a site, from a strong board of directors to the interaction between the board and the executive director.¹²⁸ Anselma's passionate leadership is one of the key reasons it has managed to achieve the success it has in such a relatively short period of time.

¹²⁶ Julia Elizabeth Coombs, "House Museums: Who's Minding the Site, A Study of the Attributes of Professional Historic Site Directors." Thesis for the graduate program in Historic Preservation at the University of Pennsylvania, 1997. p. 63

¹²⁷ Tom McKenna, Fels Institute for Public Policy, Personal Communication

¹²⁸ Tom McKenna, Fels Institute for Public Policy, Personal Communication

Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Thinking Outside the Box

Laurel Hill Cemetery is an example of an historic site that is literally all about dead people and as a cemetery, it could be limited to that concept. However, the site's leadership, beginning with new Executive Director Ross L. Mitchell in 2003, has focused on expanding the site's public image and program offerings, with a strong emphasis on creativity and connecting a historic cemetery to the interests of modern audiences.

Established in 1836, Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia was the nation's second Picturesque cemetery, designed as part memorial site, part rural landscape for promenades and picnics in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The social elite interred there are remembered by impressive monuments ranging from small marble headstones to tall gothic obelisks, from evocative figural sculptures to the massive marble mausoleums of notable 19th-century Philadelphia families including Rittenhouse, Widener, and Strawbridge. Encompassing 74 acres along the Schuylkill River, Laurel Hill was the first cemetery designated as a National Historic Landmark.

At the time of its designation in 1998, the National Park Service Conditions report noted

Despite its importance, Laurel Hill, like many historic cemeteries, stands at a crossroads. It is surrounded on three sides by the city that grew out to meet it. It sees few burials, scant visitation, and little income. The

condition of the cemetery has gradually declined throughout the twentieth century.¹²⁹

In 2004, under new leadership, Laurel Hill initiated a strategic planning process to “help chart a course of revitalization for this neglected Landmark.”¹³⁰

In its pursuit of private contributions, grants, and visitors, Laurel Hill faced significant competition from Philadelphia’s vast assortment of cultural institutions, including The Woodlands, another National Historic Landmark in Philadelphia that features one of the country’s most outstanding examples of Adamesque architecture surrounded by a picturesque cemetery established in 1840 that is also the final resting place of many distinguished Philadelphians.¹³¹

As museums of all kinds compete for visitors and funding dollars, the need for a compelling mission and clear identity has become more obvious. *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty, and Support* (2006) explains that “branding” - creating a distinct image - helps give a museum an individual personality and style. The public “face” of an historic site and the overall impression visitors take away is what encourages the general public and funders to relate to the museum’s mission.

¹²⁹ National Park Service, National Historic Landmark database, <<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=272336158&ResourceType=District>>, also Lisa Kolakowsky, National Park Service, Personal Communication.

¹³⁰ National Park Service, National Historic Landmark database, <<http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=272336158&ResourceType=District>>

¹³¹ According to a brochure from The Woodlands, among those buried in the site’s 1840 rural cemetery are painters Rembrandt Peale and Thomas Eakins; Anthony J.Drexel, the founder of Drexel University; and architects Wilson Eyre, Jr. and Paul Philippe Cret.

Most museum professionals have already started down the road toward recreating their museum as a fresh, vibrant, forward-looking organization. Smart museums are finding their identities, articulating their core values, and as any good professional would do, seeking new ways to enhance their image.... When a museum can claim a distinct identity from which it builds supporter loyalty, it has a brand.¹³²

Laurel Hill sought to engage the public by creating a new identity for itself. Since the 1998 National Park Service report Laurel Hill has evolved from a neglected cemetery with a low profile to an active and welcoming public site, alive with a variety of programming and special events. Laurel Hill continues to offer its long-standing events such as the New Year's Eve celebration of Gettysburg hero General Meade as well as the popular after-dark Halloween tour which capitalizes on the public's appetite for holiday spookiness. The timeless tragedy of the Titanic provides a popular theme for a tour of the graves of six passengers buried at Laurel Hill.¹³³

In recent years the site has added a traditional fundraising event, the gala Gravediggers' Ball, and participated in citywide events to heighten awareness among new audiences. The Juneteenth festivities in Philadelphia celebrate African-American independence from slavery; Laurel Hill offered a new Juneteenth event highlighting the collaboration of area blacks and whites during the Civil War. The site also participated in the Philly Fringe Festival, hosting a sold-out performance of "The Late Laureates of

¹³² Margot A. Wallace, *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty, and Support*. Lanham, New York: Alta Mira Press, 2006. p 6-7

¹³³ Among the passengers buried at Laurel Hill are Lilly A. Potter, Mrs. Olive Potter Earnshaw, and Mrs. Eleanor Elkins Widener, all of whom survived the disaster. The body of William Crothers Dulles was recovered and he is interred there. Father and son George Dunton Widener and Harry Elkins Widener are memorialized with cenotaphs in their honor (Eleanor was wife to George and mother of Harry).

Laurel Hill: A Twilight Reading of Spoon River Anthology,” which was performed on the cemetery grounds at dusk.

In 2006 a significant shift occurred when Laurel Hill was able to leverage a Fels Fund grant into an \$80,000 pro-bono marketing and re-branding campaign culminating in a new identity for Laurel Hill as “The Underground Museum.” This new concept was launched with a redesigned website and a guerilla advertising campaign¹³⁴ featuring irreverent, funky advertisements including one illustrated with a magnificent marble memorial and copy that read

Death has an upside. This lovely sculpture park, for example. Laurel Hill is more than just a cemetery. It’s an outdoor art museum, historic landmark and horticultural gem. Come for a tour and see for yourself. Visit theundergroundmuseum.org for details.

Visitors to the website see the new angel head wax seal logo, a panoramic view of Laurel Hill and miniature slideshow that promises visitors will find “Beauty,” “Unexpected History,” “Mystery,” and “Untold Stories.” The creative team selected contemporary design that evokes something old, in the same manner an Edward Gorey illustration is both quirky modern and Edwardian.

Providing consistency and repetition, the new identity or “brand” appears everywhere – on the newsletter and even on new products Laurel Hill offers for sale in its online and onsite gift shop.

¹³⁴ Using non-traditional techniques that ranged from elevator door cling-on “posters” resembling an ornate mausoleum entrance to podcast tours of the cemetery downloadable from the computer.

The historic site chose to work with Red Tettemer, an advertising agency known for its exceptional creativity. The advertising agency's team "created a new tourist destination by seeing tombstones as sculpture, a cemetery as a museum and its inhabitants as celebrities."¹³⁵ With this new identity, 19th-century Laurel Hill enters the 21st century.

Lessons

Think "outside the box"

Historic sites should understand that a creative approach to history does not denigrate the subject matter, but can enhance it and makes it approachable by an even wider audience. Venerable sites such as Mount Vernon have acknowledged the need to consider "sizzle" in presenting their site to the public. During a 1998 symposium in Philadelphia, the director of Mount Vernon, James C. Rees, explained

We began to look at marketing as something other than a distasteful word. In developing new programs, we started to ask not just what our historians and curators wanted to teach, but what our visitors wanted to learn. We hired marketing and media relations professionals, not from the museum field, but from the private sector, and we began to feel comfortable when they referred to 'market shares' and 'corporate partners.' We've learned that sometimes no matter how good the steak might be, as our marketing people say: you've got to sell the sizzle.¹³⁶

Be involved

¹³⁵ Red Tettemer website, <www.redtettemer.com>

¹³⁶ James C. Rees, "Forever the Same, Forever Changing: The Dilemma Facing Historic Houses" *American House Museums in the 21st Century: An Athenaeum of Philadelphia Symposium*, December 4-5, 1998. <<http://www.philaathenaeum.org/hmuseum/rees.htm>>

Historic sites must not limit themselves to the confines of their property. At Historic New England, site directors are encouraged to become involved in community matters, from local tourist development programs and chambers of commerce to community-wide events. Laurel Hill wisely links itself to city-wide event programming such as the Philly Fringe Festival¹³⁷ and Juneteenth celebrations.¹³⁸ This outreach provides additional publicity for the site and reaches audiences who might not think about visiting Laurel Hill otherwise.

Find contemporary connections

Laurel Hill is in the development phase of a new program called the Urban Mourning Project (UMP) the intention of which is to help children, families and communities understand and appreciate new rituals connected with urban violence, such as sidewalk memorials, spray-painted RIP murals, car decals, commemorative t-shirts and tattoos and to connect these new rituals with long-lost historic traditions. The program creates numerous community partnerships and will unite experts in the arts, history, healthcare and community service who will offer alternative outlets for the aggression and pain connected with violent crime.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ The Philadelphia Fringe Festival began in 1997 and is based on the International Festival and accompanying Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Festival now spans sixteen days and features performing arts events featuring some of the most innovative and successful contemporary artists from the region and around the world.

¹³⁸ “Juneteenth” celebrates independence from slavery for African Americans and while the official date is June 19th, the festivities span either side of that date and include parades, family gatherings, musical performances, lectures and numerous events showcasing Philadelphia’s rich African American heritage.

¹³⁹ “The Laurel Hill Ledger.” Laurel Hill Cemetery newsletter. Winter 2007

Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Taking a Creative Approach

In the wrong hands, this crumbling urban ruin in the core of a major metropolitan city might have been considered a white elephant and demolished to make way for a condominium tower. Instead, 23 years after it ceased operating as a prison, this National Historic Landmark site is an internationally-known destination, featured on the front page of the *New York Times* travel section,¹⁴⁰ on television, and in motion pictures. The site's ongoing commitment to creative programming, neighborhood partnerships, and other strategic marketing tactics has resulted in Eastern State Penitentiary's (ESP) rising visitation trends and ranking among the top 20 most visited tourist attractions in Philadelphia.¹⁴¹

Located in the Fairmount Park section of Philadelphia, the prison was designed by noted architect John Haviland (1792-1852). When it opened in 1829, it represented a radical experiment in prisoner reform using solitary confinement to encourage "penitence" and reflection. ESP continued to serve as a prison long after the "Philadelphia System" fell out of favor and it closed in 1971 after almost a century and a half of use. Famous former inmates of the prison include Al Capone (1929-1930), Willie

¹⁴⁰ The New York Times featured ESP on the front page of its travel section in 1997; the site was featured more recently in a May 11, 2007 article, "In the Big House...Just Visiting" by Maura J. Casey

¹⁴¹ Center City District and Central Philadelphia Development Corporation, "State of Center City 2007." p.15

Sutton (1942-1946) and “Pep the Dog” (1924-?),¹⁴² who is memorialized on coffee cups and t-shirts available at the gift shop.¹⁴³

Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) opened to the public as a historic site in 1994 under the guidance of Sean Kelley, who previously worked in the education and marketing departments at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and had some background in theater. For five years he was the only full-time employee at the site. At the time, the primary challenges were restoration and ongoing maintenance of the dilapidated site and a lack of endowment.¹⁴⁴ These same issues plague historic sites of all sizes.

ESP has slowly increased its marketing efforts since opening in 1994. The site offers a popular mixture of programming that includes the cell block audio tour, art installations, theatrical presentations, a Bastille Day celebration and the annual haunted prison extravaganza.¹⁴⁵ Extensive media relations efforts include a press kit that highlights special topic tours, seasonal event highlights, press release announcements about upcoming exhibits and performances, as well as basic background information about the prison. Most of ESP’s advertising budget is directed toward reaching regional audiences, reflecting the current majority of the site’s visitation data. The national media outreach is an important component of the site’s communication strategy and Kelley places stories about ESP and its various activities in national magazines, television and

¹⁴² ESP lore has it that “Pep the Dog” (prisoner number C2559 in his mug shot) was given a life sentence for killing Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot’s wife’s cat. An alternative story suggests the governor donated the dog to improve prison morale. Eastern State Penitentiary press kit

¹⁴³ Eastern State Penitentiary, “Fact Sheet.” 2007. On a site visit in October 2006, the gift shop featured numerous items displaying images of the prison as well as these famous former inmates.

¹⁴⁴ Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication, March 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Eastern State Penitentiary Press Kit 2007

newspapers. The resulting coverage often becomes part of the package presented to other media, government officials, or funders.¹⁴⁶ He works closely with the Greater Philadelphia Convention and Visitor's Bureau and the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, which provides a number of services to member organizations.¹⁴⁷ The cumulative result of these years of effort has been an increase in visitation of 1,250%, from just below 11,000 visitors upon opening to approximately 148,000 in 2006.¹⁴⁸ The site is now open seven days a week from April to November and draws visitors from around the country.

ESP has created an open-ended site experience that allows the visitor to engage the public areas at their own pace and to follow their interests. A 40-minute audio tour, narrated by actor Steve Buscemi, is offered free after admission if desired. It incorporates the real voices of three wardens, and twenty-two officers and inmates.¹⁴⁹ The tour takes visitors through the oversized entrance gates, through cellblocks, the mess halls, hospital and prison chapel, into a guard tower, the exercise yard and Death Row.

ESP is an historic site that does an exemplary job of talking to its patrons to evaluate the visitor experience. Their 2006 survey,¹⁵⁰ given monthly, included questions about where the visitors live, how they heard about the site (word-of-mouth is a strong

¹⁴⁶ Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication.

¹⁴⁷ The mission of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance is to expand awareness of, participation in and support for the arts and culture in the region. It offers its approximately 330 members services that range from marketing support in the form of event calendars, ticket sale promotions and cooperative advertising, to advocacy and community planning services. John McInerney, Director of Marketing and Communications, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, Personal Communication, April 2007.

¹⁴⁸ Center City District & Central Philadelphia Corporation, "State of Center City 2007." p. 12

¹⁴⁹ Eastern State Penitentiary, "Fact Sheet." 2007.

¹⁵⁰ 2006 Eastern State Penitentiary Survey Data, provided by Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication, March 2007.

component), the length of their Philadelphia stay, and what other sites they planned to see in the area. Guests are asked questions about the tour, exhibits and programming in order to probe visitor likes and dislikes and indicate where changes might need to be made. Many visitors were unaware of the art exhibits, but are overwhelmingly positive in their opinion. When asked what they didn't like about their visit, most indicated they wanted to see more – the sort of “negative” response that would please any site manager. The resulting data help guide both programming and marketing efforts.¹⁵¹

The event that currently brings in more than 60% of the annual operating budget was not part of the original plan for the site, but each October crowds of visitors are drawn to the annual haunted house at ESP. Some visitors arrive from as far away as Vermont, North Carolina or San Francisco.¹⁵² The event provides the opportunity for extensive media coverage, including “special investigations” by television shows that report on supernatural phenomena. ESP's website links to video of these programs' coverage of the prison is an excellent use of the internet to pique visitor interest in a trip to the site.

Now that the Halloween event has reached capacity, ESP is looking to expand or develop other offerings. ESP accepts that the visitor experience is the primary means to success and understands the need to participate in the local community. “Meet the Artist” events will allow visitors to gain a more in-depth understanding of some of the installations on site and expose them to the creative process of individual artists. The

¹⁵¹ 2005 and 2006 Eastern State Penitentiary Survey Data, provided by Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication

¹⁵² Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication, March 2007

Bastille Day celebrations have become a Fairmount area tradition and involve the entire neighborhood, with restaurants creating special promotions and dining packages before and after the annual “storming of the gates.” ESP’s “good neighbor” policy seeks to thank the local community for its support, so any resident in a ten block radius has free admission to events at the site.¹⁵³

ESP is a unique site but its success was not guaranteed. Hard work, creativity and leveraging its interesting programming – “telling the tale” in a way that was exciting and interesting – has collectively built a reputation over time. Word of mouth sent more and more people each year because the site focused on providing a compelling experience – yet never in a manner that would demean the meaning or significance of the site. ESP is developing a new 10 year plan that will presumably define success for the site over the next decade.

Lessons

Think of your neighbors

ESP offers all neighbors in a ten block radius free passes to visit the site. This creates goodwill so that during busy periods (especially the crowded annual haunted house) local businesses and residents are more forgiving of the inconvenience the site creates. Sites in a less urban setting might consider offering free passes in Welcome Wagon baskets distributed to new residents. Invite local business owners to a special

¹⁵³ Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, Personal Communication.

event in their honor to familiarize them with the site and keep it in mind when shoppers or tourists ask for recommendations in the neighborhood.

Keep on target

ESP relates all its activities back to its core mission, from new programming ideas to what items are appropriate to sell in the gift shop. It engages in many creative endeavors, from the haunted house to site-specific dance performances, but each can be traced back to the site's stated purpose. Having a clearly stated mission statement keeps collecting, programming, fundraising and other activities focused on the ultimate goal.

Think big

ESP sets its sites on national media and has been featured on national television (C-Span broadcast live from the prison) and national magazines and newspapers, including the front page of the *New York Times* Travel section. Don't limit communications outreach to the local daily newspaper. Contact television stations about a visually-compelling event. Think regionally and consider what other means can be employed to spread the word about the site. Build long-term relationships with the media by keeping them informed of interesting activities or creating special events (e.g. behind-the-scenes tours, special tourism briefing hosted at the site, etc.) specifically to draw their interest.

Talk to the visitors

ESP surveys its visitors each month, using both written forms that provide quantifiable data and collection of anecdotal comments from visitors departing the site.

This valuable feedback shapes the site's programming and marketing efforts. It flags both positive and weak areas in the site's presentations and can be an important measure of whether a site's interpretive offerings are connecting with visitors.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Too often, preservation thinking is trapped in a rut defined by tradition. A vast majority of historic house museums, especially the smaller sites, have the perception that they have no time or resources to think beyond what's always been done. With recognition of the crisis facing the very survival of many sites, and the search for techniques and solutions that will keep historic house museums open to the public into the 21st century, that immobility is beginning to change. There is recognition of the need for new ideas and a willingness to attempt to implement them.

This discussion about the importance of making sites speak to the public using community connection and innovative communication tools is but one contribution to what is, one senses, a turning point in preservation history. There is a realignment taking place that will demand changes, privatize some houses, and possibly result in painful losses for others where help arrived too late to save them. Sites open to new ideas will need to develop a broad-based action plan that may involve changes in their board, fundraising, interpretation, signage, and, as this effort is meant to recommend, communications and community connection efforts.

Preservation has come a long way since the early days when patriotic women's groups would rally to prevent the demolition of a founding father's house. Preservation has become a field of professionals, where each year scores of masters' degrees are awarded to new passionate preservationists. One hopes they arrive on site with a clearer understanding of what a house museum needs to survive – as well as a better

understanding of what it takes to run a nonprofit 501(c) 3 organization, including a professional board of directors who can drive the mission statement and take governance seriously rather than an interested group of enthusiasts.

Historic house museums must serve the public. They must take their role as part of a community network and provide opportunities to connect individuals to one another and to an understanding of how and why history is relevant to our present and our future. One hopes that this discussion may contribute meaningfully to their efforts to survive.

Appendix: Communication Toolkit

Most historic sites already know about placing their special events in local newspaper calendar listings. There are books like *Public Relations for Dummies* that will spell out the form and technique for writing a simple press release. The information below is not a step-by-step method for building a marketing or promotional plan which can be found elsewhere, but more of a menu of creative ideas that will help build awareness and expand resources at the site. The key elements are becoming an integral part of the community, building partnerships, and creatively using some aspect of the site to increase awareness. Remember that each step undertaken builds experience for the next step and, cumulatively, builds awareness and visitation.

Play up strengths

Among the case studies is a discussion of Laurel Hill Cemetery which is pursuing a dynamic mix of creative programming and community partnerships, as well as a new “brand” identity that will attract new types of visitors.

By contrast, The Woodlands is also a National Historic Landmark and features one of the country’s best examples of Adamsesque architecture as well as an interesting cemetery of notable Philadelphians. Yet the Woodlands suffers from resource shortages: a staff of one, no help with programming, and no facilities for tours.

Sites should look at what they already have and see if there is a means to build on it to increase awareness, build community support, or create a niche identity. At The

Woodlands, the carriage roads that wind through the property have been designated “The Woodlands Heritage National Recreational Trail.” Runners from the city use the paths as a pleasant off-road place to train. The Woodlands might consider engaging this existing audience by creating programming that would appeal to the runners: talks or coaching from sports medicine doctors and nutritionists from the nearby University of Pennsylvania, a clinic creating customized workout programs for those training for triathalons or marathons, talks given by experts from *Runners’ World* magazine (located in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, a reasonable drive from Philadelphia).

Learning proper running form is a growing trend, even for recreational runners who simply want to avoid injury. A recent article in the *New York Times* said that 60-65 per cent of all runners are injured each year and new awareness of form and its injury prevention has led to an increase in clinics.¹⁵⁴ *Running Times* magazine’s website had 38 runner retreats listed in 2000; the number has risen to more than 100 and clinics and camps all over the country have seen increases in enrollment.¹⁵⁵ Once they are on site, it is an obvious opportunity to also include some information about the site and its history.

If the site’s capacity could allow it, there could be an annual fun run on the carriage roads with a theme that would link it directly with The Woodlands, “Not Dead Yet,” “Yorick’s Last Run” or “The Painter’s Appeal” (since painters Thomas Eakins and Rembrandt Peale are both interred at The Woodlands, prizes might be given to runners

¹⁵⁴ Sarah Tuff, “Who, Me Take Running Class?” *New York Times*, June 14, 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Sarah Tuff, “Who, Me Take Running Class?” *New York Times*, June 14, 2007.

who dress in costumes based on characters in paintings. This would be an ideal photo opportunity for media and visitors). Registration fees could help raise funds for the site.

Sell It

Located on the beachfront in Margate, New Jersey, the National Historic Landmark structure Lucy the Elephant is adored by generations of shore visitors. The gift shop, located in the visitor's center adjacent to the two-story elephant-shaped former hotel, sells all manner of elephant-related paraphernalia, including swimming "trunks," packages of "Lucy" peanuts, key chains and stuffed elephants.

Historic New England licenses furniture and home accessory reproductions based on their collection (as Colonial Williamsburg has done for decades).

The Mill at Anselma has begun to sell flour and cornmeal stone ground on site and has been amazed by the popular response. They are adding items like cookbooks and locally-produced pottery to the gift shop shelves.

Inexpensive children's items sell well as souvenirs and might range from specially-packaged candy (Laurel Hill Cemetery sells sour gummy worms labeled "Worm Food" with the site's angel head logo¹⁵⁶) to period toys or books related to the site's historical period (volumes of "*You Wouldn't Want to be a.....*" Civil War Soldier, for example, sell for under ten dollars).

¹⁵⁶ Red Tettermer marketing proposal provided by Ross Mitchell, Executive Director, Laurel Hill Cemetery, Personal Communication.

Ultimately, the site's shop may become a local shopping destination for gifts. If successful, sites may consider building a virtual store online, which increases awareness of the brick-and-mortar site.

Barter

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Contact a local public relations professional with experience in consumer marketing or tourism to see if they might be interested in taking on some pro bono work. Contact a local corporation for a donation of dollars, product or resources (photocopying, printing, volunteers) and, in exchange, offer use of the site for a unusual meeting or special event location.

Draw on local resources

Open your eyes and look around. Do you, like Boxwood Hall, have a school across the street that might provide eager volunteers for everything from stuffing envelopes to a spring landscape clean up? In cities like Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia local universities abound; sites should contact the appropriate departments where students in classes on business management, marketing, advertising, film production, nonprofit management, graphic design, historic preservation, architecture, history, folklore, landscape architecture, creative writing and more are often in need of individual and class projects.

Steal from other models

One might argue that there are no new ideas, just new applications of old ideas. Charleston's annual Spoleto Festival utilizes historic sites all over town as the setting for various chamber music concerts, orchestral performances (complete with fireworks), art exhibitions and lectures. Work within your own local cultural environment to develop an annual mini-festival that brings together performing arts companies and historic sites.

Schoolchildren

School children have incredible curiosity, boundless optimism and unending energy. Tap into that by contacting local schools and building a partnership. The result might be as simple as a class visiting the site for a special tour or picnic, or something more creative like a poster contest in which the children are asked to research the site or time period and create a poster that expresses the key importance of the site. The resulting artwork might be displayed in a local community art center, in town shop windows or at the school or site. Perhaps a local corporation would underwrite design and production of a poster using the "winning" artwork.

School visits

Budgetary cutbacks have meant that many schools no longer can afford to take field trips. Historic New England taps into private and government grants that underwrite the costs for inner city schoolchildren to come to the Otis House in downtown Boston where history becomes an engaging activity as they are encouraged to role-play on the

tour of the house.¹⁵⁷ The organization makes this commitment recognizing that exposing children to history builds early interest that grows into adult support.

See the site from another angle

New communication ideas won't come from an entrenched interpretation. Talk to visitors to find out their likes and dislikes. Invite local leaders and ask their opinions. Look for new angles and stories that will provide fresh material for media and that will spark visitors' imaginations.

Laurel Hill Cemetery shifted its identity to an outdoor sculpture park and "The Underground Museum." The life stories of all the people interred on site (Titanic passengers, Civil War generals, a lost mother and child mourned by the sculptor husband and father) offer potential new programming themes. A slightly irreverent attitude from what one might expect from a cemetery refreshes their image and attracts interest from new audiences who might have ignored a historic cemetery.

Build Partnerships

There really is strength in numbers. "Partnership" may mean building community connections with local corporations, churches or schools to collaborate on local events or projects with special meaning to the community. Laurel Hill Cemetery is participating in the development of the Urban Mourning Project which will help inner city youth deal with the rage and sadness that result from the murder and violence all around them.

Partnership may also take the form of a cooperative alliance between a group of sites, which can pool resources and market themselves regionally. Promoting multiple

¹⁵⁷ Susanna Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, Personal Communication

sites encourages visitors to make the trip, knowing they will be able to entertain themselves for several hours or a day. The brochure given out at the Mill at Anselma's regular "Grinding Days" highlight activities going on at other local sites, from farmer's markets to neighboring historic properties. Part of their communications strategy is to work cooperatively with other sites to promote all the regional attractions.

Daybooks

Every media outlet has a "daybook" which lists the days' events and is used as the basis for the daily assignments. Editors and producers decide which events merit coverage and dispatch a reporter, photographer or camera crew.

When a site will be presenting a visually-compelling event, don't overlook the daybooks. The local newspaper contact should include the editor for the appropriate section (would the event be most appropriate for the "Local News," "Food" section, or "Style & Home"?) as well as the photo desk. Contact each of the local television stations. Fax, call, mail or email your information prior to the event (different outlets have different preferences). Call the day before to make sure the event is listed in the daybook. If results matter, call the morning of to ask if the outlet will be sending someone to cover the event. If they do, have someone available to help meet whatever needs they might have, which might be a spokesperson for a brief comment or access to

an off-limits area that provides a better visual. Have a full packet of information about the site for them to takeaway.

Media

To some extent, the media are followers. Prior media coverage indicates to them that it is possible to get a story out of the site. Sites that get stories printed or television coverage should use it to get more media coverage, just as Edith Armes did when promoting Stratford Hall in the 1940s and as Sean Kelley does promoting Eastern State Penitentiary today.

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Personal Communication

Jennifer April, Education Specialist, Historic Highlands, March 2007

Marc Barbella, VP, Creative Director, Red Tettemer, July 2007

Margaret Bleeker Blades, Executive Director, Historic Highlands, March 2007

Bill Bolger, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, September 2006

Jim Bradley, Public Affairs Manager, Colonial Williamsburg, July 2007

Susanna Crampton, Public Affairs Officer, Historic New England, July 2007

Audrey Crow, Historic New England, February 2007

Lee Dennis, Powel House, March 2007

Bonnie Halda, National Park Service, September 2006

Peter Iris-Williams, National Park Service, October 2006

Sean Kelley, Program Director, Eastern State Penitentiary, March 2007

Lisa Kolakowsky, National Park Service, May 2007

Sandra Lloyd, Interpretive Specialist, November 2006

John McInerney, Director of Marketing & Communications, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, April 2007

Tom McKenna, Fels Institute for Public Policy, University of Pennsylvania, January 2007

Ross Mitchell, Executive Director, Laurel Hill Cemetery, June 2007

Robert Pearson, Fels Institute for Public Policy, University of Pennsylvania, January 2007

Heather Reiffer, Executive Director, The Mill at Anselma, January 2007

Dave Rollenhagen, Master Miller, The Mill at Anselma, May 2007

Brent Thompson, Communications Director, William Penn Foundation, February 2007

Catherine Turton, Architectural Historian, National Park Service, January 2007

Michelle Wilson, Site Manager, The Powel House, July 2007

Jean Wolf, Executive Director, The Woodlands, March 2007

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