The Challenge of Interpretation at Historic House Museums

By John A. Herbst, Executive Director

In September 1990, Henry Clay Frick’s Pittsburgh home, Clayton, will open to the public. Once it is fully restored, according to the terms of Helen Clay Frick’s will, Clayton should prove to be a stellar addition to America’s historic house museums. Filled with original furniture, artwork, archival material and family personal effects, the mansion had remained largely untouched since the early twentieth century, when the Fricks moved their primary residence to New York City. The Frick Foundation has spared no expense to bring the original luster back to the 23-room house in the North Point Breeze neighborhood. The $5 million-plus restoration should result in an outstanding backdrop to a fascinating social history.

The interest in historic houses such as Clayton offers the most tangible expression of popular enthusiasm for local history. Launched in the 1850s with efforts to conserve two sites — George Washington’s wartime headquarters in the Hasbrouck House at Newburgh, New York, and his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia — the movement to preserve and restore historic houses has captured the attention and energies of countless Americans during the past 125 years. But the popular appeal of such houses also presents problems for museums.

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can point to at least a few examples that suggest at least some shifting in interpretation to introduce a large social context to historic structures.

The Woodrow Wilson House, a property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in Washington, D.C., undertook a major reinterpretation to enrich the museum’s content and enliven its teaching methods. With funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wilson House staff assembled a team of historians, museum educators, film specialists, and an architect. The project team concluded that the house’s collections and period rooms could illuminate more than the life of one famous individual. They selected the theme “Woodrow Wilson: The Washington Years, 1913-1924,” and encouraged the staff and docents to discuss the broad social history of that era. The house became a
director's gallery

The Wilson House’s approach represents a considerable advance, but it is not easy to implement. Volunteers need considerable training, but problems of turnover and recruitment make it hard to maintain an adequate pool of well-trained guides. The house’s interpretation is sometimes more successful on paper than in practice.

Another example is Eckley Miners’ Village, a state-operated historic site located in the once booming anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania. Here, several houses from a typical coal-patch town have been restored and interpreted to reflect the lifestyles of more ordinary folk. Similarly, the Worker’s World exhibit at the Hagley in Wilmington, Delaware, used a gallery exhibit to complement the owners’ and foremen’s houses preserved on site. Even more interesting are the few instances where fairly traditional historic houses and homes have extended interpretation to open other chapters in their particular history. Tours of President Martin Van Buren’s retirement home, Lindenwald, in Kinderhook, New York, now consider the role of domestic servants in the household as a way to interpret nineteenth century social structure and the influence of Irish immigration.

There is hope, then, for a more balanced presentation. Yet most individual house museums still fall prey to great-man interpretations rather than a broader socio-historical analysis. Sonnenberg Gardens in Canandaigua, New York, for example, is the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century estate of Mary Clark Thompson, who spent a small part of the year there. Although the elaborate gardens, arboretum, and greenhouses required an army of skilled gardeners, many of them residents, the people who actually implemented the garden’s design and cared for the property in the early twentieth century remain invisible in tours of the estate. During a tour in 1985, guides stuck steadfastly to the story of largely absent estate owners despite questions about the workers.

In part, this resistance to broader interpretation can be traced to the way historical houses enter the public domain. The interpretive focus and historical integrity of such institutions are affected directly by the path the property takes to museum ownership. Put simply, the beliefs of those who led the drive to preserve the house continue to shape policy even after the house has been turned into a working museum.

Most often, old homes are preserved as historic house museums through the volunteer efforts of dedicated local citizens. Such grass roots groups frequently face a monumental task taking many years. In rural McDuffie County in eastern Georgia, for example, the Wrightsboro Quaker Community Foundation spent two decades saving and restoring Rock House. When the Foundation was organized in the 1960s to preserve the history of the small eighteenth century Quaker neighborhood of Wrightsboro, some of the houses, including the Rock House, were vacant or abandoned. As with many
similar preservation groups, one person played a decisive role. Pearl Baker, a nurse with a hobbyist’s interest in history and genealogy, published a genealogical history of the Wrightsboro families and analyzed the Rock House’s unusual architecture. After persuading the house’s owners to donate it to the foundation, she organized its physical restoration and placed it in the National Register of Historic Places.

After Baker’s death in 1977, another Foundation member, Dorothy Jones, took over. Having obtained a county-sponsored minimum-wage Comprehensive Employment and Training Act position for the project, Jones devoted herself full-time to raising funds and developing widespread local support. The project required Jones and her colleagues to go far beyond her local community. To help secure a $42,000 restoration grant from the Interior Department’s Heritage Conservation Recreation Service, Foundation members and local politicians met in Washington with Georgia Governor George Busbee to match the federal grant, should it be awarded. An additional $18,000 from the sparsely populated county’s local government and $30,000 from businesses and individuals made it possible for restoration work to be completed. The restored Rock House was dedicated in 1981.

It is not surprising if, after such Herculean efforts, the proud local residents of McDuffie County want their historic house’s interpretive content to bolster community morale and glorify its past. It is unlikely that the dedicated Foundation members would willingly abandon control to paid museum professionals. In this case, however, Dorothy Jones had used the long years of restoration to train herself as a museum professional and to make contacts with others through professional association meetings. But more commonly, founders of historic houses remain unaware of the broader field of history museums and may consequently have a quite narrow vision for the house or an incomplete understanding of its educational potential. Even when they are no longer on the scene, their successors may be hesitant to tamper with the initial vision out of respect for the founders’ undeniably crucial achievements.

The challenge for museum professionals is to incorporate sound historical scholarship and current museum practices into their presentation without antagonizing the existing constituency. For example, the professionals may need to define a specific period of interpretation for a house museum that has a much longer social and architectural history. They should also investigate and document the life of the house to sort out fact from fiction. In the process, however, they may discover unexpected information and move the museum in a direction counter to the intent of the founder, the motives of the board of trustees, the prejudices of volunteer guides, or the expectations of the visiting public. For various reasons, all these groups may be captive to a romantic vision of seemingly larger-than-life figures who lived in the house. Finally, the stewardship of a historic house may fall to a multipurpose organization whose agenda for a physical plant has to be as varied as its mission statement.

My vantage point comes in part from the five years I spent as the principal museum professional involved in establishing a new museum devoted to labor and working people’s history, with headquarters in a historic home outside Paterson, New Jersey. During this time, I worked as a trustee and volunteer with the fragile organization that sought to acquire the Botto House National Landmark. The structure was the home of Italian-American silk weavers and a weekly rally site for mass meetings in the Paterson silk strike of 1913, led by the Industrial Workers of the World.

Later I became the first paid director, with the task of implementing a museum on the site. I was then forced to deal with the varied motivations and perspectives of some of the key individuals who helped to incorporate the museum. The experience demonstrated both the undeniable grip of the founders’ motives on the institution and the crucial role of museum professionals who seek to define period representation, strive for accurate site interpretation, reflect current scholarship, and reach out to involve new audiences — all without alienating original sources of support.

The Romance of a Grand Past
To remain fresh and relevant in a changing world, some house museums have been broadening their interpretation. The Hermitage, in northern New Jersey, presents an interesting study of the problems involved in this transition and how difficult it is for institutions to pull away from the romance of a supposedly grand past.

The Hermitage is a state-owned site in Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, which has been operated since 1972 by Friends of the Hermitage, a local volunteer group. This organization leases the property and administers it, a practice common among state systems of historic sites wishing to encourage local groups to support properties in their area. (The National Trust for Historic Preservation has a similar policy for some of its properties.) The organization assumed responsibility for a house with a rich nineteenth century history shrouded in misty historical connections and legends relating to the site’s, although not necessarily the house’s, romantic role in the American Revolution, when the Prevost family owned the estate. In 1778, George Washington and
his officers were guests of Theodosia Prevost for four days. Aaron Burr later courted Mrs. Prevost, by then a widow, and the couple were married at the estate on July 2, 1782.

The location of Mrs. Prevost’s “neat and convenient house, completely furnished for a gentleman’s family,” could very well have been at the rear of the present building. The present-day house known as the Hermitage was begun around 1720 in the Dutch style with a “steep, medieval roof line.” It was small and unpretentious until purchased by the Rosencrantz family in 1807. In 1849, Dr. Elijah Rosencrantz II retained architect William H. Rantlett to remodel and expand the farmhouse. Rantlett was sensitive to the Revolutionary War connections of the property, connections that had devolved during the Rosencrantz tenure in the house, known then as Waldwic Cottage. The architect wrote that “Waldwic Cottage is one of the few remaining houses in the country which have been consecrated by historical events. It was once, in ante-Revolutionary times, the residence of a wealthy English family, and during the war was at different times the stopping-place or headquarters of Washington, and...the resort of the most accomplished officers in the American Army.”

It is the Rosencrantz house, a Gothic Revival villa, which the visitor sees today. The Rosencrantz family derived its considerable means and local prominence from management and involvement in local manufacturing. Although the Rosencrantz wealth derived from nineteenth century industry, their property’s associations with Washington, Burr, and Theodosia Prevost nostalgically recalled the preindustrial era. This legacy provided the family with a country seat “consecrated” with romantic and noble antecedents.

The Hermitage came to the state of New Jersey through the last Rosencrantz, Mary Elizabeth, born in 1885. As the family fortune dwindled and relatives passed away, she clung tenaciously to the family home. For a time, in the years before 1931, she opened her parlor as a tearoom to attract visitors on Sunday automobile outings through the Washington associations. She connected various rooms with Washington and Theodosia Prevost, pointing out where the general had supposedly said farewell in 1778 and where Burr’s courting of Prevost had taken place.

Her genteel poverty grew ungentee after 1931 when she closed the tearoom. Over the next 40 years, she and a companion gradually retreated to a single room heated by a coal stove. Rosencrantz refused many offers to purchase the property, located in the growing suburbs of booming Bergen County near New York City. “She revered every inch of her home,” a commentator wrote, “and she was determined to deliver it intact to posterity.” In 1970, she and her companion died five days apart. Her will bequeathed “to the State of New Jersey the historic Hermitage and all its furnishings and the land upon which it stands to be used as a museum and park.”

Rosencrantz had fallen victim to the illusions of her property’s eighteenth century associations. Her gift to the state contained almost nothing of the Revolutionary War period: practically nothing remained of the 1720 farmhouse, which may not have been the Prevost residence anyway. Instead, Mary Elizabeth Rosencrantz conveyed to the public domain a home that reflected very well an upper-middle class lifestyle of the mid-nineteenth century. Rantlett’s 1849 renovation had created a villa mirroring the Rosencrantz family’s domestic escape from the “mechanized world of the Industrial Revolution” that built its fortune.

This particular legacy became part of the challenge undertaken by Friends of the Hermitage, organized in 1971 to stop vandalism of the property and to win state-sponsored preservation. Attacking
the problem of deterioration and arousing public interest, the volunteer group researched the history of the property and, in partnership with the state, contracted for various master plans.

In 1986, Friends of the Hermitage hired JoAnn Cotz, a cultural historian, and me to consult on the interpretation being developed for the property. The existing interpretation wavered ineffectually between a focus on the Revolutionary War visit of Washington and the Burr-Prevost courtship on the one hand and the Rosencrantz tenure on the other. We were retained to suggest how the many studies by architects, archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and dedicated volunteer researchers could be integrated into a comprehensive framework. The trustees hoped such a framework would direct future research, restoration, interpretation, and development of the site.

We pointed out that although the site had historical associations running from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, the bulk of the house’s history was squarely in the mid-nineteenth century, reflecting industrialization, the emergence of a middle class, other economic and cultural developments, and state and national politics. An emphasis on the national period in the American experience would draw upon the eighteenth century past and point toward the unclear future conveyance of the property to the public in the twentieth century.

We found that the property’s Gothic Revival architectural style and the glorification of the Revolutionary War legacy accurately reflected characteristics of the widespread romantic movement in the mid-nineteenth century. We recommended that eighteenth century history be presented as “myths and legends only partially founded in fact . . . stories which were dear to the nineteenth century family and to the last owner who spent the great portion of her life captive to its significance.”

Since then, Friends of the Hermitage has worked to adopt the approach so that a master plan for future work and programming can be developed. Although the small paid staff and several board members favored the new approach, a number of volunteers adhered to the misty Revolutionary connections first promoted by the Rosencrantzes. Resolutions have occurred over time. In 1989, the Friends adopted a mid-nineteenth century landscape restoration plan which will supply a complimentary environment for Rantlett’s Gothic villa. The Hermitage, therefore, presents a situation where the group in charge of the institution was unhappy about the lack of an interpretive focus. In spite of professional assistance, the motives of the founder (who left no descendants to represent her point of view) still prevent resolution of a critical problem.

A Shift of Time and Times

In the early 1970s, the National Society of the Colonial Dames altered dramatically the interpretation of the Ximenez-Fatio House which it operated as a museum in St. Augustine, Florida. Before this transformation, the 1798 house, built by Andres Ximenez, a wealthy Spanish citizen, had been used to interpret the last years of the Spanish occupation and thereby illustrated a crucial period in the history of “the oldest city in America.”

Whereas Friends of the Hermitage struggled to revise its structure’s interpretation, the Colonial Dames switched smoothly to a new approach: it authorized new research and then used the results to change the period being represented. Instead of rooting interpretation in the house’s eighteenth century origins — the lifestyle of a wealthy Spanish businessman — the society shifted the focus to the structure’s nineteenth century story: a house operated by a succession of well-born, down-on-their-luck businesswomen. This approach permitted the house to speak for a different period and with a broader range of historical voices. Historian William Seale, one of the consultants who worked on the project, noted that the effort had placed this chapter of the Colonial Dames “in the vanguard of a national movement toward a sharpened factual interpretation in house museums.”

Like the Hermitage, the Ximenez-Fatio house was shrouded in romanticized and, in this case, imperial legacy. The Colonial Dames had acquired the property in 1939 from an heir of Louise Fatio, the last proprietor of the hotel. Over the years, the Society kept the house, including the oldest kitchen in St. Augustine, in excellent condition, making necessary repairs and capital improvements. It rented part of the building to provide income and security and used the rest of the building for meeting rooms and eventually a museum. Not surprisingly, this early museum took the form of a large collection of Spanish antiques and reproductions, artifacts from the sunset of the Spanish presence in Florida.

By the 1960s, however, this fairly standard interpretation was challenged by new research that suggested a more complex legacy. In particular, the historical record was re-examined to determine all the past owners of the property. Adding to what was known about Andres Ximenez and his business, this
research yielded a wealth of information — and a significantly different historical perspective. After 1825, during Florida’s period as a U.S. territory, the building was converted into a hotel owned by a succession of women. These four owners — Margaret Cook (1790-1879), Eliza C. Whitehurst (1786-1838), Sarah Petty Anderson (1782-1896), and Louise Fatio (1797-1875) — had similar backgrounds. All were gentlewomen who had fallen on hard times and turned to running a guest house as a socially acceptable occupation for women of their class. This history of ownership by a series of independent, strong-minded and capable women and the work associated with a hotel operation suggested women’s history as a basic interpretive theme.

Along with revealing gender issues, new research opened yet another social history topic: the economic function of the hotel and the region in the nineteenth century. Florida received its first wave of tourists in the 1820s. Documents showed that the guests at the Ximenez-Fatio House came to see the sights, recover from severe illnesses, or escape from harsh northern winters. Tourism offered a particularly appealing theme for modern museum visitors, many of whom were tourists themselves.

Armed with current research based on sound documentary evidence, the local Colonial Dames leadership set in motion a plan for refocusing the interpretation to reflect the building’s operation as a hotel and to illuminate the themes of women’s history and tourism. The enthusiasm of the members was kindled by their involvement as researchers and by the plans for new interior restoration and furnishings produced by first-rate historians.

After auctioning much of the collection housed earlier in the Ximenez-Fatio House, the Colonial Dames outfitted the museum on the basis of such primary sources as house inventories. Clues to items needed for guest bedrooms were found in newspapers, which reported guests’ deaths and the personal effects they left behind. This enabled the museum to add authentic touches. Once restoration activities had produced a noticeable change, the Colonial Dames reduced admission fees to bring community residents and out-of-town visitors into the museum. Attendance improved along with the interpretation.

How were these changes accomplished? Why did the Ximenez-Fatio House succeed in moving on when others do not? Unified leadership within the Colonial Dames-St. Augustine chapter proved invaluable. Like the Friends of the Hermitage in New Jersey, some Colonial Dames members were devoted to the museum’s former approach, but the absence of a founder, descendant, or other major personality in the organization allowed the introduction of change without organizational power struggles. The leadership of the chapter provided a certain momentum for action, which kept the project moving. When objections surfaced, they came from community residents who vigorously promoted the Spanish era of the city and opposed weakening that aspect of the house’s history. Here the historical record was a good bulwark against criticism flowing from promotional quarters.

The consultants’ involvements were used to full advantage as outside unbiased experts. Learning about how tourists vacationed in the nineteenth century has proved a successful link to local history for today’s visitor, and this strong interpretive theme helped the Colonial Dames make the change. Embracing a broader approach to its history has made the St. Augustine chapter one of the best known and most admired in the national organization, and the state organization periodically backs up its pride in the Ximenez-Fatio House Museum with special financial support.

Confronting Stereotypes and Controversial Subjects

The efforts of the Colonial Dames emphasize the importance of creative research in revising standard interpretations. Sometimes, though, better historical presentations depend on the sensitivity of the museum’s staff to the social and political concerns of the larger community. The Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii, went off site to improve and extend routine historic house interpretation. It chose to deal directly with stereotypes, misinformation, and social conflict in order to show some of the major forces which shaped modern Hawaii.

The museum’s parent organization was founded in 1852 as the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society, created by the children of New England Calvinist missionaries who had come to Hawaii during the previous 30 years. Beginning with the native Hawaiian royalty, the missionaries converted the kingdom to Christianity, introduced a written language, began schools and health care, codified laws, and helped the small kingdom deal with the mercantile interests of competing Western nations.

The missionaries played a controversial role in Hawaiian society. They were accused of destroying a native culture, meddling in the politics of an independent nation, and controlling the economy to their own advantage. A number of children and grandchil-

Legend may pass for fact so long that new research must be done before the museum’s staff can devise interpretive strategies. Entrenched interests may balk at new findings.
Chamberlain, representative members of the mission community. The third house, the Printing Office, was where the important work of printing the Bible in Hawaii took place, as did the publication of laws, schoolbooks, and other material which had a lasting effect on the Islands.

Until 1970, the museum, based in the three buildings, opened only occasionally, serving as a quiet memorial to the early mission families and as a centerpiece for a genealogical group that documented and verified ties to the earlier group. During the 1970s, a more formal museum structure emerged, with regular visitor hours. Finally, in 1979, a reinterpretation began, carried out in part through the introduction and rearrangement of period furnishings and interpretive displays.

During the interval, however, vast changes had occurred which significantly affected the museum's potential audience. The Big Five's economic monopoly had been broken after World War II, and so, too, had the political sway of the old business and social elite. The 1960s brought about a renewed study and appreciation of a vanishing Hawaiian culture so damaged by missionaries, who had opposed such native arts as the hula and surfing and who attempted to change dress customs and abolish native religions. By the late 1970s, many residents of the Islands felt as though the missionaries had done more than anyone to destroy native self-esteem and culture. Yet the missionaries' deeds, motives, and efforts were more complex, with idealism and a desire to provide improved human services at the heart of many of their actions. Some scholars felt the missionaries had become stereotyped on the basis of impressionistic research and attitudes generated by the position of some of their descendants. It was the museum staff's task to break through these to provide a more accurate historical view.

In 1985, funds provided by the Hawaii Committee for the Humanities supported the Mission Houses Museum's project, called Missionaries in Hawaii. Six public programs held throughout the islands used role-playing, audience participation, and discussion to explain the lives of the missionaries and other Hawaiian residents of the 1820s. The role players portrayed native Hawaiians, seminary students, sea captains' families, and merchants, as well as members of the Congregational Mission. Eleven hundred people of various ancestries attended.

The project served as a catalyst for an ongoing reinterpretation of the museum, one that has affected not only interpretive techniques and content but also the composition of the guides. Today, Saturday visitors to the museum are rewarded with first-person interpretation by white and Hawaiian guides who assume the role of nineteenth century characters, actual or composite. These include male and female missionaries, an antagonistic chief, a Hawaiian minister, sailors, and other figures which help the visitor understand the missionaries' brand of religion and the new society of mixed races which was to become such a fea-
ture of modern Hawaii. As with the Colonial Dames’ house, the Mission Houses Museum has moved to broader aspects of its region’s history, and as a hereditary membership society, to validate other historical experiences in its locality.

The museum’s decision to confront ambiguities embodied in its houses rather than to avoid them was the key to ensuring a positive response. The results were enormously popular with visitors, and improved the entire operation’s image. By linking revised content to appealing teaching methods, the museum staff presented its governing board with a popular and artistic success. The staff could argue convincingly that the new interpretation was not only more accurate historically but served to build, enlighten, and captivate the museum’s audience. The staff made sure that the Mission Children’s Society, the museum’s governing board, had a good grasp of the new programs’ effects on the community. The society has consequently supported and been pleased with the changes.

The innovative role-playing programs also proved rewarding for staff by humanizing the lives of the historical characters whose deeds and homes had previously been so memoralized and sanctified that they had become one-dimensional. And new scholarship on the missionaries and the groups they interacted with also has provided new directions for interim restoration and furnishings.21

**The Historic House as Multipurpose Building**

As historical organizations evolve into more professional institutions, a more intellectually honest period representation and interpretation can conflict with other functions of an organization which has to operate within a historic house. Operating organizations are often uncertain of their mission and the role they play with regard to stewardship of a historic house.

The Passaic County Historical Society faced this problem of facility and historic representation at Lambert Castle in northern New Jersey. The mansion, which sits atop Garret Mountain above the nineteenth century industrial center of Paterson, was built in 1892 by Catholina Lambert, a prominent silk manufacturer. Lambert erected what has been referred to as a “savage face” in sandstone to house an extensive art collection he had amassed. An English immigrant, Lambert was a self-made man whose relations with this employees were notoriously bad. He was one of the most visible hard-liners during the general silk strike of 1913.

In 1922, the property was sold to the county, which subsequently tore down half the castle. The remaining wing stands in a county operated park in a location particularly accessible and inviting to park users. In 1927, the Passaic County Historical Society, which had been founded two years earlier by a fairly typical group of prominent citizens, antiquarian collectors, and history buffs, began operating a museum on the first floor.

When the society hired its first professionally trained director in 1982, it had been collecting county history for 50 years and filling formerly glorious rooms with wooden and glass cases to display the usual range of historical society materials. In one cabinet of curiosities, visitors saw a china chocolate set “used by the Empress Josephine,” a three-dimensional foundry sign, an unrealistic tin model of John P. Holland’s first submarine (tested in Paterson), and assorted marbles, fans, and candle molds.

As the new director, Catherine Keene, attempted to set future directions for the society, the question of interpreting the castle as Lambert’s house arose. Many of the more than 10,000 yearly visitors to the museum came because of the house’s striking location and imposing appearance. They expected to learn about the person who built such an edifice. But the staff lacked the furniture and other objects from Lambert’s tenure in the castle. With only some impressive dining room pieces, a substantial gravity clock, and smaller items remaining, the absence of artifacts made the building itself the real Lambert artifact.

The staff could not focus its presentation entirely on Lambert anyway. Although visitors were confused by the haphazard display of county memorabilia with no clear interpretation, there was a real need for the society to present other aspects of county history besides the story of Lambert and the Paterson silk industry. The staff faced a challenge of illuminating this broader community history in the society headquarters building while meeting the visitor’s expectation of finding the castle interpreted as a historic home.22

The solution to the dilemma came from a jointly sponsored public program. In 1983, the society entered into a consortium with the nearby Botto House National Landmark and the Paterson Museum to sponsor an exhibition on the silk industry in Paterson. The Botto House received funds in May 1983 from the National Endowment for the Humanities for an exhibit, “Life and Times in Silk City,” which opened in April 1984. The exhibition was divided into three site components. “The Worker” at the Botto House used an Italian silk worker’s home. “The Process” was presented in the renovated mill that served as the facility for the Paterson Museum. The castle interpreted the role of the manufacturers in Silk City.

The Passaic County Historical Society used the influx of money, expertise, and creativity which the exhibition partnership generated.
to banish the haphazard display methods from the museum's public rooms. To prepare for its exhibit component on the silk elite, an interpretive strategy was developed to select some rooms that would lend themselves to period representation and to identify others for contemporary exhibits that were not site specific.

The staff determined that the drawing, music, and dining rooms would be the most effective areas to interpret as period rooms. This decision was based on the rooms' physical conditions, the surviving evidence, and the story suggested by these rooms and their furnishings. The staff also decided that contemporary interpretive exhibits could best be presented in the mansion's large enclosed center court, an area that had served as Lambert's painting gallery. Its use as a gallery, therefore, was in keeping with Lambert's own intention.

During the yearlong run of "Life and Times in Silk City," the gallery held the exhibit on the lifestyle of those who owned the Paterson mills. Until recently, the staff continued to use the space for changing exhibits on such topics as county folk art. The three period rooms which had received furnishings and decorations remain to interpret Lambert's residence in the house. Short of an additional or alternate facility, the staff feels it has utilized the structure to fulfill its mission in the broadest terms and has struck a compromise between stewardship and interpretation which is effective for the institution and its constituencies.

A historic house, Thomas Schlereth has observed, contains "at least two histories: its existence as an actual residence and its past and present life as a house museum." Indeed, it is that dual component that has made the house museum a particular challenge for museum professionals and public historians. Sometimes the two histories coexist peacefully. More often, as these case studies demonstrate, efforts to convey broader social history are impeded, to varying degrees, by the museum's own assorted and accumulated furnishings: the desires and beliefs of its traditional constituency, the sometimes myopic vision of its founders or inheritors, and the restraints of its own local political and social environment.

Tensions between stewardship and interpretation, in short, are perhaps more common to historic houses than any other medium of public history. But these museums, as their popularity attests, offer one of the more exciting and accessible bridges between local history and the public. Although their traditional interpretation may be confined to a particular time and place, their stories, like biographies, present perspective on often impersonal chapters in American history. Museum professionals must work to tailor those individual histories so that the legacy of any particular house museum extends beyond the particular. The historic house's greatest asset is its personal history; its greatest potential lies in its ability to engage the public and sensitize it to the larger social context that has shaped that history and is in turn reflected in it.

1 Attendance figures, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.
3 Edward P. Alexander, Museums in Motion (Nashville: 1979), 89.
5 Ibid.
8 "The Hermitage," The Friends of the Hermitage, no date, 4.
9 Ibid., 4.
10 Ibid., 4.
11 Ibid., 5.
15 The Ximenez tenure in the building initially saw its use as a kind of public house, with liquor, gambling, and cockfights as attractions for a clientele that was certainly male. This aspect of the property's history was not emphasized by the Colonial Dames.
16 Interview with Mrs. Charles Lockwood, Colonial Dames of America, July 20, 1987.
18 Upgrading of the site continues. The Colonial Dames purchased adjoining land once part of the original property in order to reconstruct the outbuildings of the kitchen complex, such as the laundry and chicken yard. The patio, a major feature of the house, will be landscaped to provide a more accurate historic setting.
19 "Missionaries in Hawaii," Hawaiian Mission Houses Museum, no date; Noel J. Kent provides a harsh critique of the missionary descendants' rise to economic and political power in Hawaii: Islands Under the Influence (New York: 1983).
21 Interview with Debra Pope, director, Mission Houses Museum, Feb. 12, 1987. The Chamberlain House will have a new time period of interpretation. Moving the time period to 1850 will allow the museum to deal with the influences of mission children who over the years assumed economic and political leadership in the Islands.
22 Interview with Catherine Keene, director, Passaic County Historical Society, March 10, 1987.
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