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# If These Walls Could Talk: Best Practices for Storytelling in Historic House Museums

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**If These Walls Could Talk:**  
**Best Practices for Storytelling in Historic House Museums**

Hannah M. Gaston

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## Abstract

Historic house museums are one of the most common types of museums in the United States. These museums vary from large institutions with budgets of several million dollars to entirely volunteer-run organizations, but all these museums tell stories about their former inhabitants, their buildings, and their objects. While some of these museums excel at storytelling through programming and interpretation, many historic house museums still struggle to discover and implement recognized best practices. With limited resources, decreased visitation, and questions of sustainability, historic house museums have to learn to tell relevant and compelling stories to stay viable. Literature from the field suggests four best practices for relevant storytelling: 1) include diverse stories and narratives; 2) connect the past to the present; 3) build shared authority; and 4) make the human connection. This study surveys historic house museums across the United States to identify the institutional leaders of the field that are successfully utilizing storytelling best practices. Case studies of eight historic house museums led to a set of five recommendations for each best practice. These recommendations serve as a tool for practical implementation of best practices for telling relevant and compelling stories at all historic house museums.

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## Introduction

Historic house museums make up one of the largest sections of the museum field. In addition, historic house museums are also among the most diverse types of museums, ranging from single structures that are entirely volunteer-run to museums with multiple buildings, hundreds of acres of property, and budgets of several million dollars. Despite this variety, historic house museums serve as important reservoirs of histories and stories about the world in which we live and the people who occupied it in the past and in the present. Some historic house museums, however, are more successful at telling compelling, relevant stories than others. This thesis examines best practices for storytelling in historic house museums, provides examples of these practices in use, and offers actionable recommendations based on those best practices. This thesis aims to serve as a resource for historic house museums that want to learn how to best tell stories in relevant and compelling ways.

This thesis is organized in five chapters with a conclusion. Chapter One serves as an introduction to the thesis, including a definition of historic house museums and a history of the historic house movement in the United States. This chapter additionally explains the issues of sustainability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for historic house museums as resources dwindle, visitation decreases, and upkeep costs continue to rise. Chapter Two identifies the four best practices for storytelling in historic house museums through a review of the professional literature. These four best practices 1) include diverse stories and narratives; 2) connect the past to the present; 3) build shared authority; and 4) make the human connection are categorized as either practices that look in or practices that look out. Storytelling that is inwardly focused looks at how strong leadership, strategic planning, and thoughtful resource allocation lead to development of how the museum uses their spaces, objects, and the lives of former inhabitants to tell successful stories.

Looking inward allows the museum to define its goals for storytelling, deciding what stories need to be told and which stories are outdated. Storytelling that is outwardly focused seeks to make connections between the institution and the audiences they are trying to reach by using resources outside of the walls of the museum. Outwardly-focused storytelling is about the relationship between the historic house museum, the museum's audience, and the people about whom the stories are being told. Chapter Three explains the methodology of the research project, including the inspiration for the project, conducting the literature review, building the survey instrument, distributing the survey, analyzing the survey results, interviewing institutional leaders, writing case studies, and developing recommendations for best practices. Chapter Four focuses on the inwardly-focused best practices and features case studies of historic house museums that are institutional leaders for storytelling that includes diverse stories and narratives and makes the human connection. Chapter Five focuses on the outwardly-focused best practices and features case studies of four historic house museums that are institutional leaders for storytelling that connects the past to the present and builds shared authority. Finally, in the conclusion, I offer five actionable steps for each best practice, providing recommendations for historic house museums that seek to tell more relevant and compelling stories.

This thesis includes both primary and secondary sources as well as my research contributions to the field. Primary sources include interviews with the staff of eight historic house museums. Secondary sources include analysis of the professional literature. My contributions include survey data collection and analysis from 171 historic house museums, development of case studies that examine storytelling best practices in action, and establishing actionable recommendations for following these best practices.



Several people and institutions have provided significant contributions to this research project including Professor Gregory Stevens, my thesis adviser; Maryellen McVeigh, Senior Educational Programming Consultant at Liberty Hall Museum and a personal mentor; and the staff at the Montclair History Center, Aiken-Rhett House, Wyckoff House Museum, Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum, Cliveden, Laramie Plains, Beauregard Keyes House, and Hickory Hill.

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for all historic house museums. Whether a museum looks inwardly to the resources and stories already present at the institution, or looks outwardly to find new stories to tell, historic house museums have the potential to tell rich, compelling stories. Every historic house museum tells their stories in a different ways, but across the field of historic house museums in the United States, there are best practices that these museums can follow to help them tell more successful stories.

## Chapter One:

### A History of Historic House Museums from 1847 to the Present

Liberty Hall Museum in Union, New Jersey is a historic house museum that belonged to one of America's Founding Fathers, William Livingston. This small museum successfully brings in new visitors each year with an array of educational programs which welcome over 9,000 school children annually. The admission revenue from these educational programs provides Liberty Hall with essential operating funding. Yet, just over two miles away in Elizabeth, New Jersey, the Belcher-Ogden Mansion, another historic house of a Revolutionary figure, Jonathan Belcher, is open only by appointment and offers no additional programs beyond a tour of the mansion. These two museums demonstrate, to some degree, the scope of historic house museums in the United States. Some of these museums are highly successful institutions that have multi-million-dollar budgets and hundreds of staff members, while others are operated entirely by volunteers on minimal budgets. This vast spectrum reflects the long history of historic house museums in the United States, beginning in the 1840s and continuing to today. Despite or because of their long history, historic house museums now face the challenge of how to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Museum and history professionals have written hundreds of articles and books about historic house museums, utilizing case studies to explore best practices for programming in these museums, sustainability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and ways to become more relevant to a modern audience. Many of these works, however, lack actionable steps or advice on how staff at historic house museums can use the information in these case studies to benefit their own museums. The goal of my thesis is to provide these practical steps by asking and answering three essential questions:

1. What do best practices look like for telling relevant stories in historic house museums?
2. Which historic house museums are institutional leaders in the field of storytelling?
3. How do historic house museums that do not follow the best practices change their storytelling approaches to become leaders in the field?

Through an examination of best practices for storytelling in historic house museums and relevant case studies, my thesis aims to provide those actionable steps that will allow historic house museums to become institutional leaders by telling relevant and compelling stories to their audiences.

Historic house museums are among of the most common type of museum in the United States. While official numbers vary, estimates suggest that there are 15,000 historic house museums in the country.<sup>1</sup> Despite the sheer number of these museums across the country, many experts agree that the institutional health of these organizations is in decline. However, before one can begin to analyze the sustainability of historic house museums or their long history, one must first understand the definition of such a museum.

There is no official definition for a historic house museum. However, Patrick H. Butler III, a former professor in the Texas Tech University museum studies program, director of the Institute for Museums and Community Education at the University of North Texas, historian, and author of “Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community,” defines a historic house museum as:

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Ryan and Frank Vagnone, “Reorienting historic house museums: An anarchists guide,” *Proceedings of the ARCC/EAAE 2014 International Conference on Architectural Research* (2014): 97. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

A museum, subscribing to the general definition of museums offered by the American Association of Museums, that centers on the maintenance, care, and interpretation of either a single, historic residential structure or a complex of structures associated with and including a single residence that serves as the primary focus. Interpretive emphasis of a historic house museum is primarily the residential structure itself and the lives of individuals related to the structure.”<sup>2</sup>

This definition suggests that in order to be a historic house museum, the institution must meet four criteria: 1) The museum is built around or within a specific historic building or series of buildings; 2) This specific building or series of buildings includes a home; 3) The interpretation of these historic homes focuses on the lives of the people that lived there or the related historical events associated with the home; and 4) In order to be a museum, the home or series of buildings is an institutional entity of itself. Therefore, a museum like George Washington’s Mount Vernon in northern Virginia is considered a historic house museum because the site includes George Washington’s mansion, focuses on the lives of the Washington’s and their enslaved people, and Mount Vernon is an institutional entity of itself. Additionally, Boxwood Hall State Historic Site, a single historic structure in Elizabeth, New Jersey, is also a historic house museum even though it serves as both a museum and the residence of the house’s caretaker. As Boxwood Hall still focuses on the life of its former occupant Elias Boudinot, and is an institutional entity of itself, the house meets the criteria to be a historic house museum. On the contrary, a living history village like Colonial Williamsburg in southern Virginia does not meet all the criteria because as a village it does not focus on one specific home or person. While living history villages have many historic homes, these buildings are not separate museum entities of themselves, but rather a part of a collection in the living history museum.

Additionally, even if a historical home has been preserved and turned into a museum, it does not necessarily mean it is a historic house museum. For example, the Arnot Art Museum in Elmira,

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick H. Butler, “Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community,” in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 18.

New York, is housed in the former home of Matthias H. Arnot, a wealthy art collector. This museum, despite its historic home status, is not a historic house museum because the current museum does not depict his life or historic events relating to his house. While Colonial Williamsburg and the Arnot Art Museum may not officially count as historic house museums *per se*, these museums still serve an important function in the museum field and have contributed substantially to the development of the modern historic house museum.

Historic house museums in the United States have a long history shaped by political and social factors that continue to shape the field today. This history begins in 1847, when residents of Deerfield Massachusetts began a campaign to save Hoyt House, or the “Indian” House, with the goal of opening it to the public. Hoyt House was the last surviving building from the Deerfield Massacre of 1704, when French and Native American troops attacked the English settlement of Deerfield, burning much of the town to the ground and killing 47 villagers. For the contemporaries in Deerfield, the incident was recognized and revered as an important part of their history. According to Butler, this was the first recorded attempt to preserve a historic house with the intent of turning it into a museum. The residents of Deerfield failed to save the building, yet this did not deter their preservation efforts; today Deerfield is the home of Historic Deerfield, a living history historic village.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the attempts of Deerfield’s community in the 1840s, the idea of preserving historic buildings for the public’s benefit was not a popular idea in colonial America. However, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people began to take notice of colonial structures that were threatened. The first successful historic house museum and preservation effort succeeded in 1850 when the State of New York purchased Hasbrouck House, a small home in Newburgh, New

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 19.

York that served as George Washington's Revolutionary War military headquarters in the state.<sup>4</sup> According to Butler, the home's owner, Jonathan Hasbrouck, sold his house to repay a loan to the government. One of the loan commissioners, Andrew Caldwell, took interest in the preservation of the house, appealing to everyone from the local Newburgh community to the governor of New York State, Hamilton Fish.<sup>5</sup> Fish ultimately convinced the state that the house needed to be preserved, arguing that Washington's historic significance was priceless, writing: "I respectfully submit that there are associations connected with this venerable edifice which are above the consideration of dollars and cents. . . . It is perhaps the last relic within the boundaries of the State, under the control of the legislature connected with the history of the illustrious man [Washington]."<sup>6</sup> Here, Governor Fish is arguing that the legacy of this historically significant man deserves to be protected in the form of his home, or in Washington's case, one of the many places that served as his home. Today Hasbrouck House is still managed by the State of New York but is known as Washington's Headquarters State Historic Site.

Hasbrouck Home was the beginning of a historic home and building preservation movement in the United States. However, the landmark historic house preservation movement that would eventually go on to influence the entire future of historic house museums was Ann Pamela Cunningham's work in the 1850s to preserve Mount Vernon, George Washington's Virginia estate and plantation. Ann Pamela Cunningham was an early historic preservation activist, most famous for her work with Mount Vernon. By this time, Mount Vernon was owned by John Augustine Washington, a distant relative of Washington who could not afford to keep the estate. Cunningham's mother, Louisa Bird Cunningham convinced her daughter that the

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<sup>4</sup> Kim Christensen, "Ideas versus things: the balancing act of interpreting historic house museums," *International Journal Of Heritage Studies* 17, no. 2 (March 2011), 153, accessed July 25, 2018, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, "Past, Present, and Future," 19.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hosmer, *The Presence of the Past*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1965), 36.

home needed to be saved and converted into a shrine for George Washington. Louisa suggested that Ann appeal to the ladies of the United States to save the house. Ann Cunningham listened to her mother's suggestion and started a national campaign to raise funds to save the estate, creating a system of state regents to develop a network of financial development and support.<sup>7</sup> In essence, this was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century version of a crowdfunding campaign, something still used by museums today as a funding source. This national movement gathered the attention of many prominent women at the time including Susan Fenimore Cooper, daughter of novelist James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote letters to the children of the United States asking them to donate their coins "feelingly—as a simple act of love and respect for the memory of the great man."<sup>8</sup> Cooper's appeal showcases a national ideal seen in Governor's Fish's logic as well: historic homes that needed to be preserved had to have a connection to a prominent, often political male figure. Early historic house museums were based around this idea of what and who deserved to be preserved and remembered. While both Hasbrouck House and Mount Vernon focused on George Washington, other historic homes were opening as well, all focused on powerful, wealthy, white, male landowners. When Mount Vernon opened, it told the story of Washington and his immediate family, most prominently avoiding the story of the enslaved people who worked on his plantation. Telling stories of enslaved people was not something that occurred in the 1850s, especially in a state where slavery was still legal. This practice of telling the story of the wealthy, white, patriarch began at Mount Vernon and continues in many regards even today.

The opening of Mount Vernon set important precedents for the future of historic house museums. Cunningham's national appeal set the standard that historic house museums should be opened and managed by women, as women already had the social responsibility to care for the

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, "Past, Present, and Future," 20.

<sup>8</sup> Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence*, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 185.

home. This trend continued in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century with the development of organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a women's organization that formed out of the national revival of patriotism and interest in colonial America in the years following the Civil War.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Cunningham's Mount Vernon ultimately did not become a gallery shrine to Washington as intended, but instead preserved his home as if he was still living in it.<sup>10</sup> This practice was then copied by other historic houses across the country and still is today. For example, instead of shrines honoring the legacy of Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, we have the preserved homes of Monticello and Montpelier, respectively. Finally, one of Cunningham's motivations behind protecting Mount Vernon was to prevent the spread of change, as seen in her last letter to the Mount Vernon Board of Regents in 1874, in which she wrote: "Let one spot in this grand country of ours be saved from 'change!' Upon you rests this duty."<sup>11</sup> Cunningham's ideas on avoiding change set an early precedent that house museums still follow, contributing to their current perceived lack of relevance today. As Frank Vagnone and Deborah Ryan, authors of *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* explain, many historic house museums today seem "[f]rozen in a pre-determined 'period of interpretation', [and] many are viewed as irrelevant and unresponsive having fallen out of sync with the changing communities that surround them."<sup>12</sup>

By the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, in the wake of the political and social divisiveness following the Civil War, white, upper-class Americans were looking for a way to reestablish what it meant to be an American. Additionally, in the late 1800s, many of these same Americans felt threatened by the influx of immigrants bringing their own cultures to the United States. Against this

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<sup>9</sup> "DAR History," Daughters of the American Revolution, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, last modified 2019, <https://www.dar.org/national-society/about-dar/dar-history>.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, "Past, Present, and Future," 22.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, *Museum Masters*, 193-194.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan and Vagnone, "Reorienting Historic House Museums," 97.



cultural backdrop, white, upper class Americans saw historic house museums as one way to promote “traditional” American values that would lead to a good moral character.<sup>13</sup> According to Ron M. Potvin, the assistant director and curator of the John Nicholas Brown Center at Brown University, “an underlying goal of the creation of new house museums was to protect and enshrine American virtue and to indoctrinate ‘non-native’ peoples with this principle.”<sup>14</sup> Many historic house museums that opened in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had these goals in mind.

The turn of the last century was a golden age for historic house museums. The Industrial Revolution had created disposable income and new methods of reliable transportation. People suddenly had the means and the methods to reach more distant locations, causing the tourism industry to boom. Furthermore, major national celebrations like the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and the Sanitary Fairs of 1864 increased interest in the past. These events celebrated the successes of the American people and celebrated their “spirit of patriotic volunteerism”<sup>15</sup> during the Civil War. For example, Emmanuel Leutze’s famous painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” was introduced at the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, and the women’s pavilion at the centennial depicted a colonial “New England Kitchen” showcasing how far technology had advanced, while also reminiscing nostalgically about colonial life.<sup>16</sup> This increased nostalgic interest spurred the growth of the historic house museum field as these institutions reinforced these patriotic and historic ideals.

In the early 1900s, the historic house museum field reached its next major landmark with the beginning of significant government involvement. In 1907, the federal government passed

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<sup>13</sup> Ron M. Potvin, “House or Home? Rethinking the Historic House Paradigm,” AASLH, Crown Internet, August 15, 2016, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://aaslh.org/house-or-home-rethinking-the-house-museum-paradigm/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kerry L. Bryan, “Civil War Sanitary Fairs,” Philadelphia Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, last modified 2019, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/civil-war-sanitary-fairs/>.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 24.

the Antiquities Act “to protect nationally important historic, natural, and scientific resources.”<sup>17</sup>

This Act was followed by establishment of the National Park Service as a bureau of the Department of the Interior in 1916, thus allowing it to purchase and manage historic sites from other government agencies.<sup>18</sup> Federal involvement reached a peak during the Great Depression with the Historic Sites Act in 1935, which “empowered the Secretary of the Interior to purchase privately owned historic sites; to execute corporate agreements with private owners; to preserve, maintain, and operate sites and buildings for the benefit for the public; and to initiate public education programs.”<sup>19</sup> This federal involvement grew out of growing awareness and concern for historical and archaeological sites, artifacts, and the history contained therein that was seemingly threatened first by the rapidly expanding and developing country of the early 1900s and then out of financial inability to persevere these sites during the Depression.<sup>20</sup> Each of these consecutive laws gave the federal government greater ability to protect historic sites. The Great Depression also saw the creation of the Works Project Administration (WPA), a government-funded program that put unemployed Americans to work. The WPA saw the completion of various building projects and restoration tasks, furthering the influence of the federal government on historic house museums.

Developing concurrently with this increase in federal protection of historic sites was the rise of privately-owned museums. One famous private museum complex of this time period was Colonial Williamsburg, established by John D. Rockefeller in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In order to create this living history museum, Rockefeller recruited scholars, architects, and historians to help him build a seemingly-accurate historical village. Butler states that “[t]he level

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<sup>17</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid..

<sup>19</sup> Ibid..

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Burt, “Roots of the National Historic Landmarks Program: Part One,” NPS, National Park Service, last modified June 19, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/roots-of-the-national-historic-landmarks-program.htm>.

and complexity of the research program implemented by Colonial Williamsburg reached beyond any previous effort.”<sup>21</sup> This was major landmark for historic sites because it not only set a precedent for how to open a museum, it additionally contributed to the “appreciation and application of academic research techniques to the study of the American past.”<sup>22</sup> Before Colonial Williamsburg opened, the study of history was reserved for the ancient world or Europe. Rockefeller’s work proved to his American audience that the history of the United States was equally important.<sup>23</sup>

After the creation of Colonial Williamsburg, the number of historic house museums increased rapidly. According to Laurence Vail Coleman, a previous director of the American Association of Museums (AAM, now known as the American Alliance of Museums), by the 1930s there were about 500 historic house museums in the United States.<sup>24</sup> However, between the end of World War I and the year 2000, more than 6,000 historic house museums had been developed, averaging about one every three days.<sup>25</sup>

Several factors influenced this rapid increase. With the end of WWII, American soldiers who had seen the destruction of historic sites in Europe, returned home with an awareness and appreciation of historic buildings and a desire to protect them. Furthermore, the increased wealth from the post-war economic boom experienced by many Americans allowed for increased leisure time. Coupled with the creation of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s, Americans found it ever easier to travel as tourists and visit places like historic house museums. At the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, it became important to the federal government to spread the ideals of

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>24</sup> Sherry Butcher-Youngmans, *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for Their Care, Preservation, and Management*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 28.

what it meant to be a capitalist American. Similar to motivations following the Civil War, Americans used historic house museums during the Cold War as a means of educating themselves on the culture and values of capitalist America.<sup>26</sup> Then, in 1965 President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed into creation the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The NEA and NEH gave money to historic house museums and many other arts organizations, suggesting the federal government's interest in the growing museum movement. Finally, the Bicentennial in 1976 had a similar effect as the Centennial by creating a wave of nationalism and patriotism that carried through the 1980s and supported historic house museums that told the traditional, patriotic story of America.<sup>27</sup>

Historic house museums are entering a new era in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where their long-standing precedents and the traditional ideals are being questioned by their audiences. Today's society has again been swept up in a wave of hyper-focused nationalism and patriotism, similar to the late 1860s, Cold War, and Bicentennial eras. However, today's nationalism comes with a heightened awareness of the country's increasing diversity. This wave of nationalism and patriotism has not increased the number of historic house museums as it did before. Instead, historic house museums today must reckon with this audience that is fiercely patriotic, but along deep political dividing lines.

The field of historic house museums is changing, and to survive in the modern era historic house museums must change with it. One of the major challenges facing historic house museums today is a decrease of visitation to these museums nationally. A recent study published by the American Academy of Arts and Science examined historic site visitation over the past 30 years and concluded that visitation has declined steadily since 1982. The survey reported that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Butcher-Youngmans, *Historic House Museums*, v.

visitation to historic sites decreased by 13 percentage points between 1982 and 2012 across all age ranges.<sup>28</sup> The marketing research firm Research Advisors additionally “found that history museums rank dead last with family audiences who visited the eight different kinds of museums they surveyed.”<sup>29</sup> These statistics suggest the sustainability of historic house museums is at risk.

Potential causes of this decline have been credited by experts to higher gas prices, fears of terrorist attacks after 9/11, new vacation habits, changes in educational standards that place less emphasis on the importance of history, and competition from the increase of accessible entertainment options such as television, theme parks, and sporting events.<sup>30</sup> However, Sherry Butcher-Youngans, author of *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for Their Care, Preservation, and Management*, explains the sheer number of historic house museums may be a contributing factor, for “approximately one half of all museums in the country are history museums; and, among these historic houses and sites outnumber all the rest.”<sup>31</sup> This suggests that a culprit of declining visitation at historic house museums may be the fact that there are simply too many of them and that they are too much alike.<sup>32</sup> Of the thousands of house museums today, many tell very similar stories. As Patricia West argues in “Gender politics and the ‘invention of tradition’: the museumization of Louisa May Alcott’s Orchard House,” “American house museums, tidy and tastefully furnished, are arrestingly formulaic: on tour one often feels a peculiar *déjà vu*, perhaps as the silver tea service or the portrait of the colonel is pointed out.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Historic Site Visit,” Humanities Indicators, American Academy of Arts and Science, February 2016, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=101>.

<sup>29</sup> “Museum Audience Trends.” *Research Advisors Study of Family Visitation at Museums, Part II*. Online newsletter from Research Advisors. (1497 New Scotland Avenue, Slingerlands, New York 12159), Summer 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Cary Carson, “The End of History Museums: What’s Plan B?,” *Public Historian* 30, no. 4 (November 2008): 12, accessed July 25, 2018, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>31</sup> Butcher-Youngans, *Historic House Museums*, v.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Moe, “Are there too many house museums?,” *Forum Journal* 27 no.1 (Fall 2012): 56, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia West, “Gender politics and the ‘invention of tradition’: the museumization of Louisa May Alcott’s Orchard House,” *Gender and History*, 6 no. 3, (2004): 456.

West's point suggests that the impetus for visiting multiple historic house museums that tell the same story is gone. Potvin further explains that American society today is increasingly diverse, incorporating "multiculturalism, characterized by the maturity of the Civil Rights movement, the advent of expanded LGBTQ rights, and the confident voices of Americans of many ethnicities and political persuasions in American government and culture."<sup>34</sup> Yet in historic house museums there is a disconnect between the stories told at the museums and the awareness and increasing visibility of society's diversity. As many historic house museums still fail to make this connection, they are unable to "remain relevant to their visitors and communities,"<sup>35</sup> which may be contributing to visitation decline.

Another potential reason for declining visitation could be the advent of new preferences for learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as hands-on, participatory engagement. This preference has been partially brought on by the development of easily accessible and useable technology, and as a result, visitors have come to expect similar participatory experiences in museums. Cary Carson, author of "The End of History Museums: What's Plan B," explains that "[e]ducators everywhere are challenged to repackage their instruction as a form of performance art in which instructees can participate using the new personal technologies."<sup>36</sup> With the rise of these expectations for participatory learning experiences through technology, museums as educational institutions also needed to be able to create these personal and participatory experiences. While some institutions have been quick to integrate technology into their functions, historic house museums have often lagged behind. Potvin states that "most house museums, with their tradition-bound stories, rigid professional standards, and linear interpretation (in the form of

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<sup>34</sup> Potvin, "House or Home?."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Carson, "The End of History Museums," 21.

guided tours) lack the nimbleness to close the cultural gap”<sup>37</sup> and change their storytelling techniques to adapt to the needs and expectations of the modern visitor.

The practice of historic house museums telling the story of the wealthy, white, patriarch has persisted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This resistance to change harkens back to Ann Pamela Cunningham’s letter to the Board of Regents at Mount Vernon, warning them against societal change. However, by avoiding changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many historic house museums are left with the image of being “tired and antiquated—disconnected both from current issues and from their own communities.”<sup>38</sup> Museums today are expected to prove how their story of the past fits into the present. In other words, historic house museums need to prove their relevancy to their communities.

While some historic house museums have adapted to the changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, others face challenges crippling their chances. Historic house museums across the United States face a lack of resources including money, staff, and time. Decreased visitation to historic house museums only exacerbates the problem, further limiting resources available to these museums. With ever-increasing maintenance and staffing costs, coupled with declining admissions, many historic houses museums experience severe budget shortfalls. These historic house museums must decide what is most important to fund and preserve; many times other needs such as the maintenance of the historic building itself, properly caring for the collection, making the site accessible, or professional development of volunteer staff take priority over the needs and interests of the modern audience.

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<sup>37</sup> Potvin, “House or Home?”

<sup>38</sup> Carson, “End of History Museum,” 13.

As Potvin explains: “Places of local, . . . [regional, and national], relevance may suffer lingering deaths if they do not adopt new methods and philosophies.”<sup>39</sup> Historic house museums must now figure out how to become more relevant and more current without sacrificing the foundational principles of history that are at their very core. This thesis aims to address this challenge. One possible solution to building relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is through storytelling. Storytelling in historic house museums is often done through educational programming and interpretation. Programming, interpretation, and education are ideas often used interchangeably when discussing storytelling, but they are three distinct concepts.

To understand the interconnectedness of interpretation, education, and programming, one needs to look at the definitions of each. A recent definition of interpretation from the National Association for Interpretation states that interpretation is “a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, interpretation is the connection that the museum must make between the objects, exhibits, and the visitors. Freeman Tilden, often considered the “Father of Interpretation”<sup>41</sup> thanks to his work with developing interpretive strategies in the National Park Service, described interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, or by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”<sup>42</sup> Tilden believed that the static displays of objects did not allow for a real understanding of the

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<sup>39</sup> Potvin, “House or Home?”

<sup>40</sup> “What is Interpretation,” Interpret, National Association of Interpretation, 2018, accessed October 25, 2018, [https://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/About/About\\_Interpretation/nai/\\_About/what\\_is\\_interp.aspx?hkey=53b0fb4-74a6-4cfc-8379-1d55847c2cb9](https://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/About/About_Interpretation/nai/_About/what_is_interp.aspx?hkey=53b0fb4-74a6-4cfc-8379-1d55847c2cb9).

<sup>41</sup> “Freeman Tilden - Father of Heritage Interpretation,” Heritage Destination, HDC International, accessed August 4, 2019, <https://www.heritagedestination.com/hdc-library---freeman-tilden/>.

<sup>42</sup> Freeman Tilden. *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2007): 17.



subject matter, arguing that all interpretation must have an educational and explanative component.

Education, therefore, is an extension of a museum's interpretation. Magaly Cabral, author of "Exhibiting and communicating history and society in historic house museums," argues that the educational purpose of a museum is designed to "contribute towards a historical understanding, by means of [the] cultural assets [of the museum,] transformed into historical documents that are investigated in a way that enables one to understand the society in which they were raised and used, as well as their relations with the present society."<sup>43</sup> Education in a museum allows participants to gain an understanding of the cultural and historic significance of that museum through its objects. However, it is more than object-based learning. Cabral states that successful museum education must "allow the participant . . . to think in a critical and participative way about the message being received."<sup>44</sup> This suggests that education is a participatory function of a museum. The ability of a museum to let its visitors take a participatory role is being recognized as an important educational function of a museum. According to the AAM, "Each year, museums provide more than 18 million instructional hours for educational programs such as guided tours for students, staff visits to schools, school outreach through science vans and other traveling exhibits, and professional development for teachers."<sup>45</sup> While education is more than just programming, as aspects of it are involved in exhibits, displays, and even text panels, the AAM makes the important connection between education and programming.

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<sup>43</sup> Magaly Cabral, "Exhibiting and communicating history and society in historic house museums," *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (April 2001): 46, accessed July 25, 2018, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "Museums and P-12 Education," American Alliance of Museums, American Alliance of Museums, 2018, accessed December 17, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/museums-and-p-12-education/>.

Programming comes in many forms, but at its simplest, it is the activities and actions that museum professionals perform while working with the community. According to Sustaining Places, an online encyclopedia of resources for small historical organizations, programming in its various forms, “helps to develop a positive, reciprocal relationship between both the community and the museum, which is a goal that all small museums should pursue.”<sup>46</sup> Programming is an important tool of how a museum connects with its community. Therefore, as historic house museums attempt to become more relevant in their communities, one way to do this is to focus their efforts on providing relevant and successful programming.

Storytelling is a component of education that involves both interpretation and programming. Tilden explains that “storytelling is essential to historic interpretation,”<sup>47</sup> which suggests that interpretation is not possible without telling stories. Storytelling is a very old form of communication with evidence of it dating back to early cave paintings,<sup>48</sup> but it is also a “powerful medium in which modern learning takes place.”<sup>49</sup> It takes on many different forms, for in any given historic house museum, between the former residents and the objects, there are hundreds of stories to be told. The job then of historic house museum professionals is to learn these stories, make them accessible, and tell them in a way that is relevant and compelling.

Historic house museums are special historic sites with the ability to capture “the conversational and educational qualities of museums, but also the communicative, cognitive, and emotional connotations of the house.”<sup>50</sup> The traditional interpretation of historic house museums that focused on the white, male, landowner is no longer relevant. As Lisa Junkin Lopez, interim

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<sup>46</sup> “Programs and Outreach,” Sustaining Places, Museum Studies at University of Delaware, 2018, accessed December 17, 2018, <https://sustainingplaces.com/education-2/programs/>.

<sup>47</sup> Tilden, *Interpreting our Heritage*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> “A Very Brief History of Storytelling,” Big Fish Presentations, Big Fish Presentations, last modified February 12, 2012, <https://bigfishpresentations.com/2012/02/28/a-very-brief-history-of-storytelling/>.

<sup>49</sup> Carson, “The End of History Museums,” 19.

<sup>50</sup> Rosanna Pavoni, “Towards a definition and typology of historic house museums,” *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (April 2001): 16, accessed July 25, 2018, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

director of the Jane Hull House Museum in Chicago, argues, “historic house professionals are beginning to reimagine these sites as active, breathing spaces to engage with both the past and the present.”<sup>51</sup> However, while some historic house museums have succeeded in making these changes, many are still struggling without the necessary resources to make these radical changes in their storytelling. Change is possible, however, even for struggling institutions. This thesis aims to provide resources for those historic house museums that seek answers. What do best practices look like for telling relevant stories? Which historic house museums are institutional leaders in the field of storytelling? How do the museums that do not follow those best practices change their storytelling to become leaders themselves?

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<sup>51</sup>Lisa Junkin Lopez, “Introduction, ‘Open House: Reimagining the Historic House Museum,’” *Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (May 2015): 10, accessed July 25, 2018, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

## Chapter Two:

### Literature Review of the Best Practices for Storytelling

#### Introduction

Historic house museums have withstood significant periods of history, and if their walls could talk, they would have quite the story to tell. Museum professionals in historic house museums have the important job of telling those stories in a compelling and relevant way to a modern audience. According to professional literature of the field, historic house museums should aim to tell stories in four ways: include diverse stories and narratives, connect the past to the present, build shared authority, and make the human connection. While all of these best practices are accomplished by their own separate means, each best practice has the prerequisite that the museum needs to have strong leaders to guide the museum's storytelling practices. As explained in the AAM's Education Committee's seminal 1992 report *Excellence and Equity*, "[s]trong leadership on the part of individuals, institutions, and organizations will provide vision, inspire broad-based commitment, and generate resources,"<sup>52</sup> all of which are needed to tell relevant stories. I used the following literature review to help me identify and analyze these best practices as articulated in various books, journals, and articles. These four best practices are by no means a comprehensive list and they are not exclusive to historic house museums as they pertain to all cultural institutions. While these tenets are closely related and overlap in some capacities, they are each carried out by their own unique methods and bring a distinct contribution to telling stories in historic house museums.

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<sup>52</sup> American Association of Museums Task Force on Museum Education, "Excellence and Equity: Education And The Public Dimension Of Museums," (American Association of Museums: 1992): 9.

## Best Practice #1: Include Diverse Stories and Narratives

As historic house museums strive to share the stories of their former inhabitants, an important part of telling these stories is recognizing whose story is being told at the museum and whose stories are being left out. Since the opening of Mount Vernon and the advent of historic house museums in the United States, this type of museum has a long history of telling the story of a heterosexual, able-bodied, white, Christian, wealthy, male landowner. While this dominant narrative in historic house museums was commonplace for much of the last two centuries, modern audiences seek new diverse narratives. Two ways of including diverse perspectives into stories include recognizing the forgotten or overlooked people of the household and participating in new interpretations of history.

The practice of featuring the dominant white male narrative began with the Mount Vernon Ladies Association when they established Mount Vernon. Since Mount Vernon was one of the first major successful historic house museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, other house museums used the same narrative model. As author Laurie Wilkie points out, this led to the promotion of ideologies that were not only “ethnically exclusive,”<sup>53</sup> but also exclusive of socio-economic status, gender, religion, and ability. Further illustrating this point, LaGarrett J. King writes that this use of these ethnically exclusive narratives, or a white-only perspective, to tell American history was the norm until after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s when there was a push to include more diverse perspectives in history curriculum.<sup>54</sup> Diversity today encompasses more than race, and is defined by the AAM as “all the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Even when people appear the same,

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<sup>53</sup> Laurie A. Wilkie, *The Archaeology of Mothering: An African American Midwife's Tale*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>54</sup> LaGarrett J. King, “The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society,” *Social Education* 81 no.1, (2017): 14– 18, [https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se\\_810117014.pdf](https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_810117014.pdf).

they are different.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, representing diversity encompasses people of different physical and mental abilities, genders, socio-economic statuses, and belief systems. The practice of telling diverse narratives is encouraged today in the museum field and wider society as evidenced in part by the existence of a diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion committee established by the AAM with the intended goal of advocating and celebrating the strength of everyone’s “unique attributes, characteristics and perspectives that make each person who they are.”<sup>56</sup> However, many institutions still fail to follow this practice for various reasons including fear of change, lack of funding and resources.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, teaching history with the inclusion of diverse perspectives has not been strongly valued in the United States—both in schools and in historic house museums. For example, as of February 5, 2019, only two states mandated teaching histories related to LGBTQ or disabilities in public schools.<sup>58</sup> Of course, there are special cases where non-traditional narratives are taught such as that of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt<sup>59</sup> who was wheelchair bound due to polio, or Harriet Tubman, an African American woman who led enslaved people to freedom via the Underground Railroad. In fact, both Roosevelt and Tubman have historic house museums celebrating their lives, but the use of these stories have been the exception to traditional narratives.

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<sup>55</sup> “Definitions of Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion,” American Alliance of Museums, AAM, last modified 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/facing-change-definitions/>.

<sup>56</sup> “Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusion,” American Alliance of Museums, AAM, last modified 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/diversity-equity-accessibility-and-inclusion/>.

<sup>57</sup> AASLH Historic House Affinity Group Committee, “How sustainable is your historic house museum?,” AASLH Technical Leaflet #244, (2008): 1, Academic Search Complete EBSCOhost, <http://download.aaslh.org/technical+leaflets/Tech+Leaf+244.pdf>26, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Brooke Sopelsa, “N.J. governor signs LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum bill into law,” *NBCNews*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/n-j-governor-signs-lgbtq-inclusive-curriculum-bill-law-n965806>.

<sup>59</sup> Despite today’s open discussion of FDR’s life in a wheelchair, the opening of his memorial in the late 1990s caused a controversy over whether or not he should be portrayed in his wheelchair. After a six-year battle, disability rights activists won, and FDR is depicted, cast in bronze, in his wheelchair. Neely Tucker, “Wheelchair Gains a Place at FDR Memorial,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2001, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2001/01/07/a-wheelchair-gains-a-place-at-fdr-memorial/546cdfbb-c7c8-4188-92cb-9795c4458de2/?utm\\_term=.32c64a0c08cc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2001/01/07/a-wheelchair-gains-a-place-at-fdr-memorial/546cdfbb-c7c8-4188-92cb-9795c4458de2/?utm_term=.32c64a0c08cc).

This dominant historic narrative can be seen in studies examining who Americans recognize as significant historical figures. For example, Philip V. Scarpino, the director of the graduate program in Public History at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, conducted a study between 1975 and 1988 in which he asked college students to write down the names of the first 10 people that popped into their heads in response to the prompt: “American history from the beginning through the end of the Civil War.” Scarpino found that wealthy, white men were predominantly listed. In fact, the six names that appeared most regularly each year were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S Grant, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin.<sup>60</sup> While these six individuals are significant figures in the history of the United States (and they each have at least one historic house museum dedicated to their lives, with the exception of Franklin), they are all white males and their stories only represent a small fraction of the perspectives of the entire population in the United States. While Scarpino did not subsequently replicate his study, the *Smithsonian* magazine commissioned a study in 2014 about the most significant people in American history. This study was based on an algorithm developed by Steven Skiena, a professor of Computer Science at Stony Brook University and a co-founder of the social-analytics company General Sentiment, and Charles B. Ward an engineer at Google, specializing in ranking methodologies. This algorithm ranks historic figures in terms of significance and relevance to modern audiences. Skiena and Ward’s results showed that for Americans, 39 of the top 100 significant people were presidents,<sup>61</sup> suggesting a continued historical emphasis or focus on the white male narrative.

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<sup>60</sup> Philip Scarpino, “Academic Historians and Museum Professionals: Bringing the Past to the Present,” (paper presented at the meeting of the Association of Living History Farms and Museums, 1988).

<sup>61</sup> T.A. Frail, “Meet the 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonianmag/meet-100-most-significant-americans-all-time-180953341/>.

One way historic house museums might address this issue of exclusive narratives is to purposely seek out and recognize stories of the forgotten or overlooked people who occupied the house. These stories often involve people of color, women, servants, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and to some extent, children. Richard Moe, author of , “Are There Too Many House Museums?,” explains that historic house museum narratives often leave “entire segments of the American population—including women, ethnic groups such as African-Americans and Hispanics, and people who are neither rich nor famous, to mention only a few examples—woefully underrepresented.”<sup>62</sup> This underrepresentation of historic figures then gives historic power to certain people. When this happens, as Cabral explains, historic sites then tend to become “undemocratic spaces where the argument of authority prevails, [and] where importance is given to the celebration of power or the predominance of a social, ethnic, religious or economic group over other groups”<sup>63</sup> This becomes problematic because, according to Cabral, museums have the power to help society remember some names and forget or overlook others, creating immortality, in a sense, for certain historic figures.<sup>64</sup>

Museums have the opportunity and obligation to recognize that history and people are multi-faceted and dynamic. To this point, Ashley Nelson and Sharon Pharaon from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience argue that historic house museums need to emphasize the many layers of history and work to ensure that all these layers are represented in the narratives at the museum, “not just the best known or the most prevalent.”<sup>65</sup> Acknowledging diverse stories and layers of history does not mean that a museum should stop addressing the primary historic figure or the significant history of the house. Nelson and Pharaon offer that

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<sup>62</sup> Moe, “Are there too many house museums?,” 59.

<sup>63</sup> Cabral, “Exhibiting and communicating,” 43.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ashley Nelson and Sharon Pharaon, “Introduction: Reframing the historical narrative at sites of conscience,” *ForumJournal* 31 no.3 (Spring 2017): 3, Academic Search Complete EBSCOhost.



traditional narratives are still needed and often relevant, but “sharing multiple stories does not necessarily mean depicting all of them as equally important.”<sup>66</sup> This suggests that the inclusion of narratives of forgotten or overlooked people does not have to become the singular focus for the historic house museum; rather, those stories can complement the traditional narrative, contributing to a holistic view of the house’s history.

When historic house museums tell stories of overlooked people of the household, they contribute to new interpretations of history. Hilary Iris Lowe, author of “Dwelling in Possibility: Revisiting Narrative in the Historic House Museum,” refers to this ability as: “narrative agility.”<sup>67</sup> According to Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, director of the Virrey Liniers Casa Museo Histórico Nacional,” house museums have historically expressed only one primary story that fit with the traditional ideas of a historic house museum. This arrangement thus presented the museums’ version of history “as an indisputable testimony.”<sup>68</sup> According to Lowe, this historical method of presenting one view of history has taught many museum visitors that “history is not interpretative,”<sup>69</sup> that it never changes, and it is full of right and wrong answers—like a math problem. As a result, many visitors have come to expect these one-sided views of history. However, when new interpretations are included, Lowe argues that historic house museums are “arming history tourists with the skills to understand, challenge and think critically about the past.”<sup>70</sup> As visitors begin to examine perspectives and stories of people who are different than themselves—whether by race, ethnicity, income status, religion, sexuality etc., some are introduced to new ways of seeing the world. In this way, they no longer are passive visitors at a

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>67</sup> Hilary Iris Lowe, “Dwelling in Possibility: Revisiting Narrative in the Historic House Museum.” *Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (May 2015): 45, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>68</sup> Monica Risnicoff de Gorgas, “Reality as illusion, the historic houses that become museums,” *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (April 2001): 11, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>69</sup> Lowe, “Dwelling in Possibility”: 48.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 45.

historic house museum learning about the wealthy, white man who lived there; instead they are presented with new information about this person and new perspectives on who he was and how he lived his life.<sup>71</sup>

Carson articulates that exclusive narratives present a limited historical message thus creating cultural identities and values based on an idealized and incomplete version of the past.<sup>72</sup> Telling multiple narratives and stories can help create a more holistic and realistic view of the past, creating an opportunity for modern visitors to feel empathy towards historic people. Nelson and Pharaon explain that telling these often-ignored stories, known as telling stories from the bottom-up, helps visitors who may have felt excluded from the museum's narrative feel valued by the institution.<sup>73</sup>

Storytelling through the inclusion of diverse stories and narratives can benefit all visitors to historic house museums. The United States is a diverse country with a long history that is worth sharing in historic house museums. As historic house museums serve as an important means of sharing historic knowledge about the United States, museum professionals need to aim, as Moe points out, for “the establishment and operation of historic sites that truly represent the American experience in all its diversity.”<sup>74</sup>

## **Best Practice #2: Connect the Past to the Present**

In addition to the inclusion of diverse perspectives and narratives, best practices for storytelling suggest that relevant stories in historic house museums connect the past to the present. When stories are told that connect the modern visitor to the experiences of the houses' former residents, the museum helps the visitor re-contextualize what they are learning.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>72</sup> Carson, “The End of History Museums,” 12.

<sup>73</sup> Nelson and Pharaon, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>74</sup> Moe, “Are There Too Many House Museums,” 60.

Additionally, historic house museums can draw a connection between their historical time period and modern life by becoming institutions that address current social, economic, and political issues that may have also affected the home's former residents. Ultimately, connecting the past to the present provides a story to which visitors can form a deeper personal bond with the people who used to live in the house.

Historic house museums frequently find presenting an honest depiction of the past to be challenging. Christina J. Hodge from the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University explains that historic house museums are “inherently nostalgic: they are icons, indexes, and symbols of the past in the present, for the future.”<sup>75</sup> This means that some visitors may come to historic house museums with inaccurate or romanticized ideas of the past. Alex Rosenberg, a professor of philosophy at Duke University, offers that visitors have a complex way of storing and understanding historical information<sup>76</sup> and visitors can take stories about the past and re-contextualize them with modern understandings. This is not a phenomenon exclusive to the United States. For example, Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, director of the Museo Histórico Nacional del Virrey Liniers in Argentina, explains this phenomenon is seen in her museum. She states that visitors “update the meanings of objects in [historic house museums] with present day understandings of how these objects were used in the past.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, historic house museum visitors place their own modern understandings on the stories told at the museum.

However, because of their primary roles as educational institutions, museums are held to a high standard of truth. Forward-thinking professional reports such as *Excellence and Equity*

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<sup>75</sup> Christina J. Hodge, “A new model for memory work: nostalgic discourse at a historic home,” *International Journal Of Heritage Studies* 17, no. 2 (March 2011): 131. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>76</sup> Alex Rosenberg, “Humans Are Hardwired to Tell History in Stories. Neuroscience Tells Us Why We Get Them Wrong,” *Time*, October 10, 2018, <http://time.com/5418740/history-neuroscience/>.

<sup>77</sup> Gorgas, “Reality as illusion,” 10.

recommended that museums present stories, “grounded in a tradition of intellectual rigor and high standards of scholarship.”<sup>78</sup> This suggests that museum professionals have a responsibility to be good public historians by presenting accurate depictions of the past. As Lowe explains, “the job of a good public historian is to make meaningful connections between the past and individuals today, and importantly to uncover ‘what happened here.’”<sup>79</sup> In other words, historic house museums have a responsibility to present an authentic picture of the past that helps the visitor understand the true stories of the past. Lowe suggests that “pointing to the world [visitors] inhabit today is an easy way to make that connection.”<sup>80</sup>

One way of connecting the past to the present is by drawing connections from the visitors’ own experiences to the events that happened at the historic house museum. According to Lois H. Silverman, Ph.D. in the department of Recreation and Park Administration at Indiana University, allowing visitors to connect their experiences with the past will “encourage [visitors] to reflect upon and share their associations with and knowledge of history more explicitly, becoming more involved in and personally ‘connected’ to the process of history.”<sup>81</sup> Silverman’s work suggests that allowing visitors the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences in context of the past creates a safe space where visitors can use their experiences to dispel nostalgic misconceptions. Erin Carlson Mast, executive director of President Lincoln’s Cottage at the Soldier’s Home in Washington, D.C. explains that history is not frozen in time and that stories presented at house museums are “part of an unbroken arc of history.”<sup>82</sup> History is constantly being created and museums that fail to recognize this may fall out of favor with

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<sup>78</sup> American Association of Museums Task Force, “Excellence and Equity,” 13.

<sup>79</sup> Lowe, “Dwelling in Possibility,” 49.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Lois Silverman, “Personalizing the past: a review of literature with implications for historical interpretation,” *Journal of Interpretation Research* 2 no.1 (Winter 1997): 8, Academic Search Complete EBSCOhost.

<sup>82</sup> Erin Carlson Mast, Morris J. Vogel, and Lisa Lopez, “The period of significance is now,” *ForumJournal* 28 no. 4 (Summer 2014): 45, Academic Search Complete EBSCOhost.

visitors, further jeopardizing the sustainability of this field. As Lopez explains, museums that “are entirely focused on the past, . . . can lose sight of their value in contemporary society. Historic house museums not only allow visitors to immerse themselves in the past, they also provide interpretation that makes history relevant to our present moment.”<sup>83</sup> Encouraging visitors to share how their experiences connect to the past may allow visitors to gain new insights into how their personal past is reflected in the experiences of the historic house museum’s former inhabitants. Morris J. Vogel, former president of the Tenement Museum, explains that it is a responsibility of the historic house museum to “interpret this usable past [as a] guide to the present and the future.”<sup>84</sup> This is a powerful way to tell a compelling and relevant story.

Mast, Vogel, and Lopez write that as historic house museums encourage their audiences to connect their own experiences to the past, museum professionals are increasingly realizing “that they have a role to play in addressing present-day concerns. They know that the stories they tell about ‘back then’ are still relevant today, and that the stories can form a basis for addressing and understanding social justice and current events.”<sup>85</sup> This approach to storytelling through addressing issues of social justice is a second method of connecting the past to the present. Historic house museums can investigate and challenge issues and ideas that may affect both the visitors and have affected the former residents of the house. As explained by Potvin, “[w]ithin homes, families—in their many forms and meanings—have always engaged in domestic activism . . . in discussions about chores and family responsibilities, or in larger ways with arguments about politics, race, gender, and social structure and hierarchy. Historic house museums should be places to discuss and even argue the many meanings of home, from family

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

rituals to the social organizations of slave cabins.”<sup>86</sup> Potvin’s statement suggests that these former places of discussion do not suddenly stop being places where people can bring their dissenting opinions simply because the buildings have become museums. Instead, the historic buildings can continue to be used as places that encourage those who step inside their doors to freely engage in social and political debate and conversation. Furthermore, according to Natasha Reid, the executive director at the Visual Arts Centre in Montreal, museum visitors have come to expect museums to take a stance on social issues.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, if historic house museums plan to become and stay relevant in their communities, they may need to be prepared to include topics of social justice in their storytelling as a means of connecting their modern visitors to the past.

Beyond the responsibility to take on social issues, connecting people to the past can benefit the museum. Historic house museums have an ever increasing need to prove their worth to their communities. This point is stressed by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in Technical Leaflet #244, “How Sustainable Is Your Historic House Museum,” which states, “as funding for small museums becomes scarce, hours donated to docent programs and boards of directors decline, and the public has multiple educational and recreational venues from which to choose. . . staff and volunteers at historic house museums . . . need to preserve and interpret local history and relate it to broader regional and national themes.”<sup>88</sup> The AASLH believes so strongly in the importance of this form of relevant storytelling that they argue it should be a central idea for all museums. Historic house museums need to be asking themselves, “Are [our] programs based on a central idea or hypothesis that links the past to present and connects the historic house museum to the world beyond its

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<sup>86</sup> Potvin, “House or Home?”

<sup>87</sup> Natasha Reid, “Inclusive Art Gallery Practices: Exploring Collaborative Processes and Pedagogy in Outreach Community Programming,” *Canadian Review Of Art Education: Research & Issues* 38, no. 1 (December 2011): 69, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

<sup>88</sup> AASLH, “How sustainable is your historic house museum?,” 1.

gates?”<sup>89</sup> These recommendations from this major museum association suggest that historic house museums have a real need to take action and make strategic changes that make the museum more relevant to the modern visitor. As Mast, Vogel, and Lopez write, “the period of significance is now . . . not 50 to 150 years ago.”<sup>90</sup> Historic house museums that tell stories that are accurate, inclusive of visitors’ past experiences, and socially aware will help historic house museums remain relevant and continue to tell compelling stories.

### **Best Practice #3: Build Shared Authority**

A third best practice for storytelling in historic house museums is to embrace the concept of shared authority in their narratives. Shared authority is the idea that museums should allow their audiences to contribute to the development of programs and stories told at the institution. This concept of shared authority goes by many terms including community involvement and social inclusion. Despite its different names, this concept is widely recognized in the museum field as a social responsibility of every museum, yet it is not universally embraced by professionals across the field. Historic house museums can incorporate shared authority in their storytelling during the decision-making process for new exhibits and programs and through the stories shared in the museum’s narratives.

According to Reid, the first component of historic house museums telling stories through shared authority involves including the community in the decision-making process as the museum develops the stories they plan to share with their visitors. According to Reid, involving community members in this process promotes “social inclusivity, collaboration, and positive-programming with community groups.”<sup>91</sup> However, according to the AASLH, in order to build community-inclusive stories, historic house museum staff need to have connections “to groups

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>90</sup> Mast, Vogel, and Lopez, “The Period of Significance,” 44.

<sup>91</sup> Reid, “Inclusive Art Gallery Practices,” 73.

and individuals outside the organization who are leaders and decision-makers in their communities and in the professional field.”<sup>92</sup> Working with leaders from the community helps a historic house museum better understand what stories the community wants to share and how the community may want to share those stories. This is not an easy or quick process, as this ultimately involves relationship-building between the historic house museum and its audiences, which takes time. According to Pharaon, the museum needs to start working with the community prior to the story ever being told in the museum. If a historic house truly strives tell a story through shared authority, the community needs to be engaged and involved from the onset to help the museum establish their storytelling goals. Pharaon emphasizes that the entire process needs to be driven initially by the desires of the community.<sup>93</sup> Historic house museum professionals should not guess what their audiences want. Instead, as Allison Hennie writes in her essay about the proposed Eggleston Museum, museums need to develop a strategy and approach for asking their audiences what they want to see in the museum.<sup>94</sup> This takes on a variety of forms including, but not limited to advisory boards, focus groups, and evaluations.

Part of including the community in the storytelling process involves ensuring that the community feels safe and respected as a part of that process. One way to accomplish this goal is to ensure that visitors see themselves in the museum—in the staff or the stories already being told through the museum’s narratives. Reid argues that “by representing diverse communities in their curatorial decisions, historic house museums promote open-mindedness and respect.”<sup>95</sup> This challenge of diversity is one faced by many institutions, but it is an important element to

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<sup>92</sup> AASLH, “How Sustainable is Your Historic House Museum,” 5.

<sup>93</sup> Sarah Pharaon, “Discussing Dangerous Topics,” (guest speaker in Museums and Communities, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ, November 6, 2018).

<sup>94</sup> Allison Hennie, “How Community Input Can Shape a Mission: The Proposed Eggleston Museum,” in *Positioning Your Museum as a Critical Community Asset: A Practical Guide*, ed. by Robert P. Connolly and Elizabeth R. Bollwerk (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017): 144.

<sup>95</sup> Reid, “Inclusive Art Gallery Practices,” 73.



consider when working with community groups to tell stories. Lisa Falk and Jennifer Juan emphasize in an essay in the *Journal of Folklore and Education* that ultimately, no matter the method of obtaining community input, historic house museums need to maintain an authentic, collaborative, team effort between the museum and the community to find stories that the community members will find relevant and compelling.<sup>96</sup>

Decision-making is only one component of storytelling through shared authority. Beyond making the decision of how to tell stories, shared authority is additionally accomplished by the actual storytellers in the museum. However, according to Falk and Juan, telling stories through shared authority allows the museum to “be a catalyst for communities coming together to design something authentic” for that community.<sup>97</sup> Historic house museums have the professional, financial, academic, programmatic, and organizational resources to tell community stories, but ultimately need to step back and let the community “shape the intent and content of the programs.”<sup>98</sup> In this way historic house museums are providing the platform to tell the story but are allowing community members to be the actual storytellers. This allows communities to determine how they want the stories told. According to Ryan and Vagnone, allowing visitors to be the storytellers “prioritize[s] relationship building and the development of relevant narratives with local communities.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, using shared authority to develop and tell stories makes those stories relevant and compelling to the visitor.

When the creation of stories for historic house museums through shared authority is effective, it meets R.N. MacGregor’s definition of a collaborative undertaking: it is “an endeavor

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<sup>96</sup> Lisa Falk and Jennifer Juan, “Native Eyes, Honoring the Power of Coming Together,” *Journal of Folklore and Education*, (2016), <http://www.locallearningnetwork.org/journal-of-folklore-and-education/current-and-past-issues/journal-of-folklore-and-education-volume-3-2016/native-eyes-honoring-the-power-of-coming-together/>. For example, see Chapter 4, case studies from Cliveden of the National Trust and Laramie Plains.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ryan and Vagnone. “Reorienting historic house museums,” 99.

in which each of two or more groups obtain benefits from a project.”<sup>100</sup> Using shared authority to tell stories benefits historic house museums and the community in multiple ways. For visitors, as Andrew Newman and Fiona McLean explain in “Architectures of Inclusion: Museums, Galleries, and Inclusive Communities,” museums have the ability to “enable the individual to negotiate a sense of identity that is located within a collective identity of citizens.”<sup>101</sup> Giving visitors an opportunity to build a sense of identity is important, for as Nina Simon, author of “Participatory Design and the Future of Museums,” argues these “participatory techniques are particularly useful when institutions are trying to connect with members of the public who are not frequent museum-goers, people who might feel alienated, dissatisfied, or uninspired by museum experiences.”<sup>102</sup>

On the other hand, building shared authority also benefits museums. According to Elizabeth Wood, author of “Rules for the (R)evolution of Museums,” “the use of localized content and current events, particularly those related to the museum’s mission and values, reiterates its public value to the community. It also provides access and relevance to communities and neighborhoods where the museum is located.”<sup>103</sup> Finally, the stories told by the community can open new and unexpected experiences for the historic house museum. Falk and Juan write that “the information shared by the participants also points to possible new programs . . . that will add to [the museum’s] knowledge of [their community] and can be linked to museum objects, photographs, and documents.”<sup>104</sup> For historic house museums that are looking for new ways to make their collection more relevant, using the community to create and tell

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<sup>100</sup> R.N. MacGregor, “Editorial: Collaborative Partnerships,” *Art Education* 46 no. 4 (1993):4-5.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Newman and Fiona McLean, “Architecture of inclusion: museums, galleries, and inclusive communities,” In *Museums, Society, and Equality*, edited by Richard Sandell, 61, (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>102</sup> Nina Simon, “Participatory Design and the future of Museums,” in *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. by Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (London: Routledge, 2011): 21.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Wood, “Rules for the (R)evolution of Museums,” in *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change: A Collection of Essays* (Endinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2016): 32-33.

<sup>104</sup> Falk and Juan, “Native Eyes.”

stories provides the opportunity for the museum to learn a new set of stories. Building and telling stories through shared authority strengthens the programming and interpretation at the historic house museum, ultimately enriching the lives of visitors.

#### **Best Practice #4: Make the Human Connection**

A fourth best practice for storytelling in historic house museums focuses on making the human connection in the story of the house. According to Potvin, historic house museums need to abandon the term “house” and replace it with the term “home” to change “the physical and metaphorical velvet ropes [historic house museums] have come to imply”.<sup>105</sup> Potvin argues that historic house museums need to make it clear that people, not just objects, occupied the house in past. He states that using the term “house” “objectifies the museum setting, treating the building as something that is as much a part of the collection as the things contained in it rather than a place of warmth where real people lived and breathed.”<sup>106</sup> Using the word “home,” he argues “acknowledges and celebrates the events of everyday life, de-sanctifies the house and creates instead a setting for the occurrences of life.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, historic house museums, or historic home museums as Potvin proposes they should be called, need to make their interpretation and storytelling more reflective of the people who lived there. Two prominent ways of telling such stories are by making the house seem habitable and showing the human side of the former inhabitants.

Traditional methods of storytelling in historic house museums often make the homes seem like relics of the past. According to Ryan and Vagnone, “[a]ll too often historic house museums are places where a well-intended docent points at portraits, and gestures into barren rooms while sharing seemingly fact-based, exclusive narratives . . . There are few signs of

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<sup>105</sup> Potvin, “House or Home.”

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

habitation or the complexity of family life, and any opportunity for a shared, meaningful, and human connection . . . disappears.”<sup>108</sup> Historic house museums have the unique ability to transport people back in time; in fact many museums list this ability in their mission statements or program descriptions.<sup>109</sup> However, too often as visitors step across the threshold of the museum, the objects and stories told inside do not support that time travel ability so many museums claim, and the magic is lost. One way to keep that magic is for historic house museums to appear as if people currently live in them. Ryan and Vagnone posit that habitable historic house museums “introduce radical changes to [their] interiors by . . . [shunning] frozen-in-place furnishings plans.”<sup>110</sup> This suggests that historic house museum staff should routinely move objects in the house to reflect how inhabitants of the house regularly moved the furniture and other objects within the home. But making the home seem inhabited is more than just moving objects; the interpretation of those objects is another key feature of humanizing the home. Silverman explains, “while visitors certainly appreciate seeing authentic artifacts in museums and sites, they also appreciate interpretation of those artifacts as possessions in people’s lives, with specific meanings and stories, just like they are likely to have.”<sup>111</sup> Visitors come to museums with their own personal connections to certain objects they possess. Historic house museums should point out the personal connections that their former residents had with their objects, helping modern visitors relate to these historic figures through the humanized stories of the objects in the house.

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<sup>108</sup> Ryan and Vagnone, “Reorienting historic house museums,” 98.

<sup>109</sup> “10 Historic Georgia Homes to Tour,” Explore Georgia, Georgia On My Mind, accessed February 23, 2019, <https://www.exploregeorgia.org/things-to-do/list/10-historic-georgia-homes-to-tour>.; “The Mission House,” Trustees, last modified 2019, <http://www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/berkshires/mission-house.html>.; “Plan a Visit,” Tenement Museum, last modified 2019, <https://www.tenement.org/plan-a-visit/>.; “Changing Childhood,” Liberty Hall Museum, Kean University, accessed February 23, 2019, <http://www.kean.edu/libertyhall/education/changing-childhood>.

<sup>110</sup> Ryan and Vagnone, “Reorienting historic house museums,” 99.

<sup>111</sup> Silverman, “Personalizing the Past,” 9.

In order to further assist in the storytelling of those humanized objects, Ryan and Vagnone suggest that staff should “eliminate all denied spaces by making the movement through the house as real as possible.”<sup>112</sup> This harkens to Potvin’s argument of the importance of removing the physical barriers that are often set up in historic house museums to preserve and protect the objects in the room. As most people do not presumably use velvet ropes or stanchions in their homes, these barriers should be taken down to help visitors feel like they have stepped into a place that is occupied. Furthermore, barrier removal is not just a good way to help people feel that the home is habitable, but in many cases, it is also required by law. According to Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko in *Museum Administration 2.0*, “barrier removal is key to accessible design and a universal design; it is an essential factor to Title II of [the Americans with Disabilities Act] ADA.”<sup>113</sup> Many historic house museums struggle to comply with all facets of ADA and according to the Historic House Trust of New York City, “less than 3% of historic house museums have front door access for the physically disabled and even fewer have access to other floors.”<sup>114</sup> Many of these sites are limited in regards to what features of the buildings can become ADA compliant because they are registered as national or state historic sites and certain features which do not comply with ADA cannot be removed.<sup>115</sup> However, under the reasonable accommodation clause of ADA, employers and places of public service are required to provide reasonable accommodations, or changes to the site, that would then allow employees or visitors with disabilities to be able to do their job or visit , unless doing so would pose an undue hardship

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<sup>112</sup> Ryan and Vagnone, “Reorienting historic house museums,” 99.

<sup>113</sup> Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, Hugh H. Genoways, and Lynne M. Ireland, *Museum Administration 2.0* (London: Rowman & Littlefield/American Association for State and Local History, 2016), 205.

<sup>114</sup> “Physical Access Projects,” Historic House Trust, Historic House Trust, last modified 2019, <https://historichousetrust.org/what-we-do/physical-access/>.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas C. Jester and Sharon C. Park, “Preservation Briefs: 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible,” National Park Service, Technical Preservation Services, last modified September 1993, <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/32-accessibility.htm>.

on the site.<sup>116</sup> Barrier removal is an easy way to accomplish one aspect of physical accessibility in the museum.

Making the home feel and look as if it is lived in is only one aspect of making the human connection. Historic house museums need to build stories that show the human side of its former occupants. As Potvin explains, homes are places where people “ate and slept, drank too much, had sex and raised children, fought with each other, and maintained strong and controversial belief systems—in short all of the things that happen in a home today.”<sup>117</sup> Just because the building is now a museum does not mean that those most basic human activities should not be discussed. Potvin states that historic house museums should tell stories about their former occupants “warts and all, because our flaws are an important part of what makes us human.”<sup>118</sup> Ryan and Vagnone support Potvin’s argument, adding that these stories need to tell of the “rumors, gossip, and conjuncture” that lives in any household.<sup>119</sup>

While some historic house museums may try to hide these flaws, exposing them through authentic storytelling has the potential to help visitors connect with the historic figures of the home on a deeper level. According to Silverman, “historical interpretation can be made more comfortable, familiar, and engaging for audiences if it were to incorporate more everyday life behaviors.”<sup>120</sup> This suggests that the use of stories that give visitors the opportunity to recognize their everyday experiences and behaviors, even their flawed ones, in the experiences and behaviors of the museum’s former residents help visitors feel more comfortable in that space.

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<sup>116</sup> Barbara Kate Repa, “Your Right to a Reasonable Accommodation Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA),” NOLO, NOLO, last modified 2019, <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/free-books/employee-rights-book/chapter7-8.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Potvin, “House or Home?”

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ryan and Vagnone, “Reorienting historic house museums,” 100.

<sup>120</sup> Silverman, “Personalizing the Past,” 8.

The goal of making the human connection in the house is to allow people to understand the former residents on a personal level. To this point, Silverman argues “studies show that if little opportunity exists for visitors to personalize what they encounter, many may leave the [historic house museum] feeling that history is remote and irrelevant to their lives.”<sup>121</sup> Storytelling through making a human, personal connection gives the historic house museum the chance to demonstrate for their visitors that their stories and their museum is relevant, even to people’s lives today. As historic house museums are ever in need of proving their worth in their community, making the human connection is vital to making the case for their relevancy.

## **Conclusion**

Visitors to historic house museums want to hear stories about history with which they can relate.<sup>122</sup> All four of the abovementioned best practices are intended to make storytelling in historic house museums more relevant and meaningful for visitors. Research shows that many people feel disconnected with history,<sup>123</sup> but historic house museums are uniquely positioned to challenge this misconception. As museums that deal with real people in real situations, historic house museums represent a part of history to which most people can relate. Most everyone has a home, in some sense, so therefore, every historic house museum has the opportunity to resonate with modern visitors to some degree. Storytelling in historic house museums should aim to enhance this connection to visitors. Many historic house museums struggle to follow these best practices, but a number of museums have succeeded in incorporating these storytelling practices into their interpretation. Eight museums that have succeeded in incorporating these best practices

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<sup>121</sup> Silverman, “Personalizing the Past,” 7.

<sup>122</sup> Conny Graft, “Listen, Evaluate, and Respond! The Colonial Williamsburg Visitor Research Story,” *AASLH History News* 62 no. 2 (Spring 2007).

<sup>123</sup> “People, Places, and Design Research,” *Audience Research for the Minnesota History Center*, Northampton, MA (1990).; Philip Scarpino, “Academic Historians and Museum Professionals.”; Lois Silverman, “The pilot study report: People and the Past,” *Mosaic* 1 no.2-3 (1992): 2-5, 12.

are outlined in Chapters Four and Five all provide examples of how strong leadership, mission alignment, and effective resource allocation can lead to successful storytelling. Including diverse stories and narratives, connecting the past to the present, building shared authority, and making the human connection helps historic house museums tell compelling and relevant stories for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century visitor.



## Chapter Three:

### Research Methodology

The primary goal of my thesis was to gather research and analyze data to help historic house museums across the country understand and implement best practices for storytelling, interpretation, and programming in their institutions. The research I conducted focused on obtaining realistic data on how historic house museums of all sizes and types and across all 50 states and the District of Columbia tell stories through their various interpretative approaches. My research process involved conducting a literature review, crafting a survey instrument, identifying historic house museums to survey, sending the survey out to the potential respondents, analyzing survey results, identifying and interviewing institutional leaders, writing comparative case studies of each of the leaders, and developing recommendations for other historic house museums to help them implement best practices for storytelling in their own museums.

My research project was developed out of my desire to gain a clearer understanding of best practices for storytelling and programming in historic house museums. While current literature exists that discusses best practices for both programming and storytelling in historic house museums, some historic house museums find it challenging to find ways to implement many of these best practices; my thesis project aimed to identify these challenges and to provide actionable steps toward best practices that historic house museums can follow.

My research methodology was inspired by the study and related book *Magnetic: The Art and Science of Engagement*, by Anne Bergeron and Beth Tuttle. In that study, Bergeron and Tuttle were interested in discovering what makes museums “magnetic,” or have the ability to attract and keep visitors. The authors conducted a survey of non-profit organizations across the

country, and from their survey analysis determined six best practices: Build Core Alignment, Embrace 360° Engagement, Empower Others, Widen the Circle and Invite the Outside In, Become Essential, and Build Trust Through High Performance. The book explains each best practice and offers a case study to further illustrate how certain institutions exemplify the identified practices. I used a similar approach for my project and identified best practices through the existing literature. Similar to Bergeron and Tuttle's methodology, I researched institutions that exemplified my identified best practices and interviewed their staff to develop case studies discussing how these institutions implement those best practices.

At the beginning of my research project, I conducted a review of existing literature in order to better understand the current best practices for storytelling and programming in historic house museums. I primarily located literature through research databases such as ProQuest and EBSCOhost available through the Seton Hall University Library system. I further advanced my research using sources and readings from the syllabi of various classes I have taken as part of my graduate work in the Museum Professions program, such as Museums and Communities, Museum Education I and II, and Legal and Ethical Issues in Museums. Some of the readings I used were journal articles and blogposts by Elizabeth Wood, Nina Simon and Lisa Falk and Jennifer Juan, all well-known and highly-regarded leaders in the museum field. Additionally, I used several books addressing the issue of relevance and programming in museums that are considered seminal texts for the field, such as *The Art of Relevance* by Nina Simon and *The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* by Frank Vagnone and Deborah Ryan.

Conducting this literature review slightly altered my original thesis goals. Initially, my plan proposed to understand best practices solely for programming in historic house museums. While conducting the literature review, however, I came to understand that the field already

benefits from a significant amount of research on best practices for programming. Instead I discovered the field lacked literature and best practices for storytelling. Programming and storytelling are separate but closely-related topics in museums, as through museum programs, the museum tells a story. This slight shift in my focus helped me better understand the purpose of my thesis. Ultimately this literature review allowed me to identify the four best practices for storytelling in historic house museums that shaped the rest of my thesis: include diverse stories and narratives, connect the past to the present, build shared authority; and make the human connection.

In order to explain the four identified best practices, I described each practice via two methods of implementation. For including diverse stories, the literature suggests that museums should recognize the forgotten or overlooked people of the household and participate in new interpretations of history. According to the literature, in order to connect the past to the present, historic house museums should draw connections from visitors' life experiences to the experiences of the house's former residents and become institutions that discuss and challenge issues of social justice. Building shared authority can be accomplished by letting the community be a part of choosing which stories to tell and giving the community opportunities to be the storytellers themselves. Finally, historic house museums can make the human connection by furnishing the home to look as if someone lives in it and showing the flawed sides of the home's former inhabitants. The explanations of these four best practices formed the basis of my literature review.

After conducting the literature review and more clearly understanding the shift in my thesis goals, I crafted a survey instrument that aligned with the identified best practices. I chose to use Qualtrics, a survey development platform made available to Seton Hall University

students, to create and distribute the survey. I created a test survey using other survey development platforms including Survey Monkey and Google. Each of these platforms were tested to determine the adaptability of the end product across computer or phone screens, the success of the distribution process, and the ease of completion and submission for my participants. Qualtrics allowed for a variety of styles of questions to be asked, proved easy to distribute, and allowed for an easy export of data to an Excel spreadsheet; therefore..

The purpose of the survey was to identify historic house museums in the United States that are institutional leaders in implementing each best practice. Therefore, as my literature review outlined methods of implementing each best practice, my survey was designed to determine how successfully each participant historic house museum followed the recommended practices. The survey questions were edited and revised under the guidance of my thesis advisor, Professor Gregory Stevens, and a test survey was sent to colleagues and peers for a final test. Upon making their recommended edits, the survey was ready to be sent to historic house museums across the county.

The next stage of my methodology focused on identifying historic house museums of various sizes and types across the United States to be recipients of the survey. During this phase, I identified 205 historic house museums to be recipients of the survey. Historic house museums were identified through Google searches or via regional museum association websites including the Association of Midwest Museums (AMM), Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM), Mountain Plains Museums Association (MPMA), New England Museum Association (NEMA), Southeastern Museums Conference (SEMC), and Western Museums Association (WMA). I ensured that I selected at least three historic house museums from each state as well as the District of Columbia to be my recipient museums. To ensure I had a wide sample of historic

house museums, I tested a representative sample of 50 of my recipient museums (24.4%) against a set of four test categories: 1) developed environment; 2) geographic location in the country; 3) governance type; and 4) estimated relative size. The developed environment (rural, suburban, or urban<sup>124</sup>) was based on population density according to the US Census Bureau.<sup>125</sup> Geographic location was based on state membership of the six major regional museum associations mentioned above.<sup>126</sup> The third category of governance type was based on AAM accreditation statistics that list different types of museum governance styles. AAM accreditation provides a legitimate reference point as the accreditation process serves as a “national recognition of the museum’s commitment to excellence and the highest professional standards of museum operation and public service.”<sup>127</sup> The accreditation reference points for governance type included: Private Non-Profit, College/University, State, Municipal, Federal, County/Regional, Other (e.g., joint governance, trust, school district), and Tribal.<sup>128</sup> The final category estimated relative size—small, medium or large—was based on the AASLH’s loose distinguishers between museum size, which includes “characteristics such as the physical size of the museum, collections size and scope,”<sup>129</sup> and the museum’s online presence. The data for the four categories was analyzed for the 50 museums that made up the sample. The table below lists the

<sup>124</sup> The US Census Bureau defines urban as an area with a population density exceeding 5,000 persons per square mile, suburban as an area with 4,999 to 1,000 persons per square mile, and rural as areas with 999 or less persons per square mile.

<sup>125</sup> US Census Bureau, “Geography Program: 2010 Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria,” United States Census Bureau, United States Government, last modified November 26, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural/2010-urban-rural.html>.

<sup>126</sup> American Alliance of Museums, “Council of Regional Associations,” American Alliance of Museums, American Alliance of Museums, last modified 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/council-of-regional-associations/>.

<sup>127</sup> American Alliance of Museums, “Accreditation Program Benefits,” American Alliance of Museums, last modified 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/accreditation-excellence-programs/benefits-of-participation-in-the-accreditation-program/>.

<sup>128</sup> American Alliance of Museums, “Accreditation by the Numbers,” American Alliance of Museums, American Alliance of Museums, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/accreditation-excellence-programs/accreditation-by-the-numbers/>.

<sup>129</sup> “Small Museums Community,” American Association for State and Local History, AASLH, last modified 2019, <https://aaslh.org/resources/affinity-communities/smallmuseums/>.

test category, the total number within the sample, and the percentage of the sample within each category:

Category	Total Number of Sample	Percentage of Sample
<b>Type of Developed Environment</b>		
Urban	23	46%
Suburban	11	22%
Rural	16	32%
<b>Geographic Location</b>		
Association of Midwest Museums	9	18%
Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums	11	22%
Mountain Plains Museums Association	7	14%
New England Museum Association	3	6%
Southeastern Museums Conference	14	28%
Western Museums Association	6	12%
<b>Governance Type</b>		
Private Non-Profit	21	42%
College/University	1	2%
State	8	16%
Municipal	6	12%
Federal	2	4%
County/Regional	8	16%
Other (e.g., joint governance, trust, school district)	3	6%
Tribal	1	2%
<b>Estimated Relative Size</b>		
Small	42	84%
Medium	8	16%
Large	0	0%

Chart Showing Representative Sample Data, Gaston, 2019

As this was a representative sample of my total list of recipient museums, this sample showed that the majority of historic house museums that received my survey are located in an urban area, are small museums, and are private non-profit institutions. Additionally, while my sample shows that I planned to collect data from museums in every area of the country, most of the recipient museums are located in member states for the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums and the Southeastern Museums Conference.

After I had analyzed my data, ensuring that the recipient museums represented a broad sample of historic house museums in the United States, I sent my survey out to the selected 205 museums via email. As online survey response rates tend to be low, averaging a 30-40%

response rate for an internal survey and only a 10-15% response rate for external surveys,<sup>130</sup> I sent out the survey via other platforms to potentially increase my response rate. The additional platforms included the AAM Museum Junction blog, Museum-L Listserv, MAMP Listserv, and MuseumEd Listserv, all well-known and highly-trafficked platforms for museum professionals. I decided that I would collect results for two weeks and then close the survey assuming I had enough responses to continue my thesis research.

The final step of my research methodology before beginning to develop the case studies was to analyze the data I had collected from the survey. Surprisingly, I received 171 survey responses, 106 of which came from museums that were on the original list of the 205 recipient historic house museums. Therefore, I had a 52% response rate from my original recipient list. A total of 65 responses came from other institutions not on my original recipient list. The high number of survey responses may suggest several things including that the field is well networked and willing to help, is interested in gaining new resources, or recognizes a need for best practices.

Unfortunately, I was unable to use all of the 171 responses for various reasons. Twenty-six of the responding museums did not fit the definition of a historic house museum found in Chapter One<sup>131</sup> and ten museums did not allow me to contact them for further questions related to a potential case study. As the next step of my research was to develop case studies, which required further contact with the museums, those institutions who did not allow me to contact them, could not be used in my research. Additionally, I received 52 incomplete responses and

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<sup>130</sup> Andrea Fryrear, "What's a Good Survey Response Rate?" Survey Gizmo, Survey Gizmo, last modified July 27, 2015, <https://www.surveygizmo.com/resources/blog/survey-response-rates/>.

<sup>131</sup> "A museum, subscribing to the general definition of museums offered by the American Association of Museums, that centers on the maintenance, care, and interpretation of either a single, historic residential structure or a complex of structures associated with and including a single residence that serves as the primary focus. Interpretive emphasis of a historic house museum is primarily the residential structure itself and the lives of individuals related to the structure." Butler, "Past, Present, and Future," 18.

decided not to use these incomplete responses in my data. I also discovered that two museums had sent two responses each from different employees. Finally, three museums self-identified as not fitting the definition of a historic house museum. With the all the disqualified responses, my final number of useable results was 114.

The next step of analyzing the results was determining if the responses I received were representative of my original recipient list, thus being representative of historic house museums across the country. In order to determine this, I studied a representative sample (24.6%) of my 114 results using the same four test categories I had used to study my representative sample of recipient museums. This sample included 28 of the 114 museums that responded. See the table below for a comparison between the results from the recipient list and the results from the useable data:

Category	Recipient List: Total Number of Sample	Recipient List: Percentage of Sample	Useable Responses: Total Number of Sample	Useable Responses: Percentage of Sample
<b>Type of Developed Environment</b>				
Urban	23	46%	6	21%
Suburban	11	22%	12	43%
Rural	16	32%	10	35%
<b>Geographic Location</b>				
Association of Midwest Museums	9	18%	3	11%
Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums	11	22%	7	25%
Mountain Plains Museums Association	7	14%	2	7%
New England Museum Association	3	6%	4	14%
Southeastern Museums Conference	14	28%	9	32%
Western Museums Association	6	12%	3	11%
<b>Governance Type</b>				
Private Non-Profit	21	42%	18	64%
College/University	1	2%	3	11%
State	8	16%	1	4%
Municipal	6	12%	1	4%
Federal	2	4%	1	4%



County/Regional	8	16%	3	11%
Other (e.g., joint governance, trust, school district)	3	6%	1	4%
Tribal	1	2%	0	0%
<b>Estimated Relative Size</b>				
Small	42	84%	23	82%
Medium	8	16%	4	14%
Large	0	0%	1	4%

Chart Showing Comparison between Representative Data from Recipient Museums and Representative Data from Useable Respondents, Gaston 2019

The sample analysis of my responses showed similar trends from the sample analysis of my recipient list. Most museums that responded are located in suburban areas, are small, private non-profit institutions that are located in member states of either the Mid-Atlantic Museum Association or the Southeastern Museums Conference. Despite the minor differences, the sample testing of my respondents showed that I had acquired responses from a variety of types of historic house museums across the country.

The next step in the process was the in-depth analysis of my data. As the purpose of my survey was to determine which historic house museums were leaders in the field in terms of following best practices for storytelling, I developed a tool to track the strength of each survey response in relation to each best practice. I used a total of 11 questions on the survey to create this tool and test the strength of the participant museums. I pre-identified acceptable answers that indicated that a museum was following the specified best practices. I identified the acceptable answers based on the articulated best practices from the literature. The table below lists the questions from the survey and the acceptable answers I looked for when determining if a museum was an institutional leader in a best practice for storytelling:

Question Number	Question	Acceptable Responses
<b>Best Practice #1: Include Diverse Stories and Narratives</b>		
8E	Ability to tell stories from multiple perspectives	Very Effective
12	What story is primarily told at your historic house museum?	Stories other than the prominent white male narrative

13	What other stories do you regularly tell at your Historic House Museum?	Based on answer to question 12— inclusion of words such as servants, enslaved people or slaves, women, children, etc.
<b>Best Practice #2: Connect the Past to the Present</b>		
8F	Inclusion of difficult social topics	Very Effective
8G	Ability to address difficult topics in your community	Very Effective
9	Do you allow visitors to touch objects	Yes
<b>Best Practice #3: Build Shared Authority</b>		
7	What evaluation strategies do you employ	Focus Groups and/or Interviews
8D	Inclusion of various audience groups and community collaborations	Very Effective
<b>Best Practice #4: Make the Human Connection</b>		
8B	Effort to make home look furnished, as if someone lives there	Very Effective
10	Do you regularly use stanchions or barriers	No, in none of the rooms
11	Do you rotate objects	Yes

Chart Showing Survey Questions and Acceptable Answers for Each Best Practice, Gaston, 2019

For a historic house museum to be considered an institutional leader they had to provide acceptable answers for each of the pre-selected questions under that specific category of best practice. Of the 114 respondent museums, 29 museums fulfilled the requirements for at least one best practice. I originally intended to only use museums for case studies that fulfilled all the requirements for each best practice; however, no museum answered all 11 questions with the required answers. Therefore, in order to choose museums to use as case studies, I chose the museums that had answered the most questions with acceptable answers and therefore had the highest scores overall. I chose the Montclair History Center and the Aiken-Rhett House to use as case studies for best practice #1, the Wyckoff Museum and the Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum for best practice #2, Cliveden and Laramie Plains, for best practice #3, and the Beauregard-Keyes House and Hickory Hill for best practice #4. These eight museums are reflective of data from my representative sample of participant museums. Each of these historic house museums is located in a different state, with the two largest concentrations in member states of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums and the Southeastern Museums Conference. Additionally, most of these institutions are small, private not-for profit museums located in suburban areas.

With these institutions chosen to serve as case studies, I developed a series of interview questions exploring how each museum implements each best practice.

The questions for best practice #1:

1. Why did you decide to tell stories of people that are often overlooked?
2. How do you locate these diverse stories?
3. Every story is best served in a different way. How do you determine the best method of interpretation for the stories you want to tell?
  - a. Please provide some examples of how you are telling these stories.
4. What are some of the successes you've experienced in telling diverse stories across a range of interpretative approaches?
5. What are some of the challenges you've experienced in telling diverse stories across a range of interpretative approaches?
6. What advice do you have for other historic house museums trying to tell the stories of others?

The questions for best practice #2:

1. Why is it important for your organization to help connect the past to the present for your visitors?
2. How did you choose which issues to focus on in your interpretation?
3. How have you determined the best method of interpretation for connecting the past to the present?
  - a. Please provide examples of how you are advocating for social justice issues.
4. In what ways do your visitors' stories and life experiences help inform and influence your interpretation?
5. What are some of the successes you've experienced in connecting the past to the present for your visitors?
6. What are some of the challenges you've experienced in connecting the past to the present for your visitors?
7. What advice do you have for other historic house museums trying to connect the past to the present?

The questions for best practice #3:

1. Why is practicing shared authority important to your institution?
2. How do you define shared authority at your institution?
3. How do you decide which community members to include in your shared decision-making process?
4. What is your process for reaching out and building relationships for your key community stake holders?
5. When does the community get involved in the decision-making process?
6. In what types of activities and programs do you involve community members/visitors at your museum?

7. What are some of the successes you've experienced in building shared authority at your museum?
8. What are some of the challenges you've experienced in building shared authority at your museum?
9. What advice do you have for other historic house museums trying to build shared authority to tell stories?

The questions for best practice #4:

1. Why is it important to make a human connection for your visitors?
2. What is your process for determining how to connect the human side of your inhabitants with your visitors?
3. How do you show the human side/flaws/realities of your former inhabitants?
4. What are some of the successes you've experienced in making the human connection at your museum?
5. What are some of the challenges you've experienced in making the human connection at your museum?
6. What is your advice to other historic house museums trying to make their historic home look humanized?

I conducted case study interviews via email, phone and Skype with follow-up questions asked via email.

Using the information gathered from the interviews, I developed comparative case studies between each of the two museums for each best practice. Chapter Two explained two components or methods of implementing each best practice. Therefore, in each case study I explained what each museum did to incorporate those components into their storytelling. The case studies were divided by best practices that are inwardly-focused, examining leadership, mission alignment and resource allocation to develop how museums use their spaces, objects, and former inhabitants to tell successful stories; or best practices that look outside of the museum's walls to find connections between the museum, the museum's audience, and the former inhabitants. In the conclusion of my thesis I crafted recommendations in the form of five actionable steps for each best practice to be used by other historic house museums seeking to implement and understand the current best practices in historic house museums.

I developed a methodology that aimed to discover the institutional leaders of historic house museums that are using best practices to tell stories. However, my methodology had inherent flaws. For example, the historic house museums that responded to my survey self-assessed the work at their institution. This means that there was no measurable standard in my survey for what actions deserved to be classified, for example, as very effective versus effective. While it may have been a flaw, the range of responses and the conclusions I drew from those responses about how best practices should be implemented for storytelling are supported in the professional literature. This suggests to me that this perceived flaw did not negatively affect my research and I am confident that I chose the best examples of institutional leaders from those who responded.

## Chapter Four:

### Case Studies—Looking In

#### Looking In

Museums are visitor-centered institutions. One way to serve the visitor is to seek opportunities to change the stereotype that historic house museums are “the sleepest corner of the museum world”<sup>132</sup> by developing new ways for the public to understand the importance and value of the historic home. Some historic house museums do this by telling stories that look inward. This type of looking is about how strong leadership, strategic planning, and thoughtful resource allocation lead to development of how the museum uses their spaces, objects, and the lives of former inhabitants to tell successful stories. Looking inward allows the museum to define its goals for storytelling, deciding what stories need to be told and which stories are outdated. Best practice #1: Include Diverse Stories and Narratives and best practice #4: Make the Human Connection focus on storytelling techniques that are inwardly focused that help museums not only use the tools already present in their spaces to tell relevant and compelling stories, but also to create opportunities for the museum to explore what tools and stories are not present but should be. Telling diverse stories requires a museum to see what narrative is being presented at the house and what narratives are missing. Similarly, making the human connection at requires a museum to look at the interpretation of their presentation and find ways to make their museum less like a museum and more like a home where people actually lived. The Israel Crane House and Historic YWCA at the Montclair History and the Aiken-Rhett House at the Historic Charleston Foundation as well as the Beauregard Keyes House and Hickory Hill are institutional leaders for the best practices that look inward to tell relevant stories.

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<sup>132</sup> Ruth Graham, “The great historic house museum debate” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 2014, <https://www.boston.com/ideas/2014/08/09/the-great-historic-house-museum-debate/jzFwE9tvJdHDCXehIWqK4O/story.html>.

## **Best Practice#1: Include Diverse Stories and Narratives**

### Case Study from the Israel Crane House and the Historic YWCA at the Montclair History Center

The Israel Crane House and Historic YWCA at the Montclair History Center in Montclair, New Jersey is a leading institutional example of historic house museums that tell diverse stories. Today this historic house museum excels at telling the stories of all its former occupants and engaging the community in developing new interpretations of history. The home was originally built in 1794, commissioned by Israel Crane, a wealthy businessman who owned a general store, several textile mills, and a rock quarry, and built a turnpike. The house remained in the family until the early 1900s, when it was purchased by the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) to be the ‘colored’ branch of the Montclair-North Essex headquarters. In this function, the building was used for “offices, dormitories, and as a social center for African American women until 1965.”<sup>133</sup> In 1965 when the YWCA decided they needed to tear down the Crane House to build a new building, a group of residents who were concerned about the demolition of Israel Crane’s historic house, decided to purchase the house and move it a mile down the road where it would be preserved as the Montclair Historical Society and restored as the home of Israel Crane. This historical society used the house to tell the story of Israel Crane, his wealth, and his life. It was essentially the dominant white male narrative seen in many early historic house museums. This restoration and narrative continued until the mid-2000s when the board and staff recognized a need to change the narrative at the house as it was not reflective of the house’s full story or the demographics of their community<sup>134</sup> which was 59% white, 32%

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<sup>133</sup> “Crane House and Historic YWCA,” Montclair History, Montclair History Center, accessed July April 17, 2019, <https://www.montclairhistory.org/crane-house-and-historic-ywca-new>.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Montclair History Center Staff, interview by author, April 17, 2019.

Black or African American and 5% Hispanic or Latino in 2000.<sup>135</sup> With strong leadership from the board and a clear mission, the museum was able to reinterpret the historic site. Today the history center openly acknowledges its commitment to tell the full story of the house, which is seen in its mission statement: “to preserve, educate, and share. We preserve our local history through our historical buildings, artifacts and documents. We educate the community on local history and its importance through programs, advocacy and exhibits. We share the stories and history of the various persons and groups that have and continue to shape Montclair.”<sup>136</sup> While preserving, educating, and sharing, the Crane House and Historic YWCA succeed in telling stories that are diverse and encouraging of new interpretations and understandings of history.

According to the Montclair History Center’s website, “the house has had three lives—as the Crane family home, as a YWCA for African American women and girls, and as a historic house museum.”<sup>137</sup> The museum staff aim to tell stories from all three periods of the house’s history. One way they do this is by offering the Many Voices tour of the house. This is a docent-led tour of the house and is the standard tour offered to visitors. The Many Voices house tour takes visitors through the house and explores the many different time periods of the house and the people who lived in those respective periods. Each room of the house is staged to represent a different time period: Israel Crane’s room from the 1700s, a dining room from the 1840s, a borders’ dining room from the mid-1900s, a club room from the late 1900s, and a series of colonial bedrooms reflecting the early historical society’s ideas of preservation and narrative. Tours through these different rooms and these different time periods allow tour guides to share stories of Israel Crane, his wife, his enslaved people, African Americans coming to Montclair

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<sup>135</sup> “Montclair, New Jersey Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts,” Census Viewer, Moonshadow Mobile, last modified 2012, <http://censusviewer.com/city/NJ/Montclair>.

<sup>136</sup> “Mission and History,” Montclair History, Montclair History Center, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.montclairhistory.org/new-mission-and-goals>.

<sup>137</sup> “Crane House and Historic YWCA,” Montclair History.



with the Great Migration, a female physician from the 1880s, and African American women and girls finding community at the YWCA. Additionally, the Many Voices tour makes connections across the histories of Montclair, the state of New Jersey, and the United States. In fact, the tour of the house begins with an exhibit that examines the history of the house in the context of those three geographic lenses.

Beyond the Many Voices tours of the house, the museum uses their school programs to tell stories that can lead to the development of new historical interpretations. One of these school programs, Eye-Witness to Black History, uses primary sources like George Washington's obituary, an advertisement for an enslaved person, and a newspaper article about cross burning to discuss African American lives in Montclair, New Jersey and the United States as a whole.<sup>138</sup> Museum educators encourage students to reexamine how events happening in the United States affected what was happening in New Jersey and in Montclair, such as Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan. Encouraging students and visitors to make these connections across history and geographic regions help their visitors gain new understandings and interpretations of history and the world around them.

Making this radical change in their narrative did not come easy for the history center. Many members of the African American community did not want to share their stories with the Montclair History Center. Many African American women did not trust the historic site to accurately tell their stories because for the first 30 years, the history center only focused on Israel Crane and had ignored the YWCA's existence. The museum began this trust-building process by inviting women involved in the former YWCA to a neutral community space to share their stories. It started with only eight or nine women, but eventually grew as other women and members of the African American community saw that the history center was truly committed to

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<sup>138</sup> Montclair History Center Staff, interview.

telling their stories.<sup>139</sup> Museum staff firmly believe that an important part of building and keeping this trust with the African American community is that the museum has consistently shown a desire to tell a more inclusive narrative and bring to light the diverse stories of all the people who lived and worked in the house.<sup>140</sup> With this relationship, the museum is seeing success with its new storytelling techniques. Visitors leave the experience with a new understanding of history. While the museum uses exit surveys to evaluate their programs, they also use anecdotal evidence to gauge their success. Museum staff frequently hear white visitors express shock and sometimes guilt for their ignorance of the history of the African American community in their own town. One staff member reported hearing a white woman say: “I was living in a vacuum. I had no idea.”<sup>141</sup> Additionally, the museum measures their success through evidence of trust with the African American community. For example, the history center recently received a gift of a collection of scrapbooks from a leader of a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Museum staff said that this gift would never have happened a few years ago and it is a sign that the museum has earned a level of respect within the African American community in Montclair.<sup>142</sup> Telling stories that include underrepresented people is not always the easiest way to tell a story in a historic house museum, but it is a way that may lead to growth of community trust and understanding. The Israel Crane House and Historic YWCA at the Montclair History Center provide an excellent example of how one museum successfully tells stories that are diverse and encourage new interpretations of history.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

## Case Study from the Aiken-Rhett House at the Historic Charleston Foundation

Similar to the Montclair History Center, the Aiken-Rhett House at the Historic Charleston Foundation in Charleston, South Carolina, is an institutional leader in the field when it comes to telling diverse stories. Supported by their leadership, decision making, and resource allocation, the museum tells diverse stories through their updated house, grounds, and outbuildings tours, and encourages new understandings and interpretations of history through trainings and educational programs. According to the Historic Charleston Foundation’s website, the foundation “is an advocacy organization advancing the mission of historic preservation. . . . [by addressing] modern society’s needs – mobility and transportation, tourism, livability and growth – while protecting and preserving the architecture and material culture of Charleston and its Lowcountry environs.”<sup>143</sup> The Aiken-Rhett House seeks to fulfill the mission of the Foundation, while serving the community as a historic site with its own set of goals. According to the webpage about the house, the museum “believe[s] that every memory, every place, every story woven together is who we are. So, as a people and culture, we exist not apart from brick and mortar, marsh and mud, cobblestone and wrought iron, but together with – and within them.”<sup>144</sup> This philosophy of preserving and using buildings to tell stories plays an important role because the museum is more than just a house. The museum grounds include a kitchen, the original enslaved people’s quarters, carriage block, laundry building, and back lot.<sup>145</sup>

The house itself was built in 1820, commissioned by a wealthy merchant John Robinson. It was later purchased by Governor and Mrs. William Aiken, Jr. who expanded the home. The

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<sup>143</sup> “Honor What Makes Us,” Historic Charleston, Historic Charleston Foundation, accessed July 23, 2019, <https://www.historiccharleston.org/about/>.

<sup>144</sup> “The Places & People That Helped Shape Charleston,” Historic Charleston, Historic Charleston Foundation, accessed July 23, 2019, <https://www.historiccharleston.org/house-museums/>.

<sup>145</sup> “If these walls could talk,” Historic Charleston, Historic Charleston Foundation, accessed July 23, 2019, <https://www.historiccharleston.org/house-museums/aiken-rhett-house/>.

Foundation acquired the house in 1995 and “adopted a preserved-as-found preservation approach, meaning the structure and contents are left in an ‘as-found’ state, including furniture, architecture and finishes that have not been altered since the mid-19th century.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, the house looks and feels much like it did in the 1800s, and the museum staff use this preservation technique to their advantage to tell diverse stories of all the people who lived and worked there as if they too can still be ‘found’ in the house.

The Aiken-Rhett House’s primary means of storytelling is through their audio guide which takes visitors through the outbuildings, the grounds, and the house. The museum began using an audio guide in 1999 when the Foundation’s leadership decided that the tour guides were not telling the full story of the house. The leadership was concerned that the tour guides were overly focused on telling the story of the Aiken’s while telling only limited stories of the enslaved people and free men and women of color who worked in the house. Which stories were being told mattered to the Foundation because the Aiken-Rhett House is unique in its preservation style, for “[w]hile many dependency buildings in Charleston have been demolished or adapted, the Aiken-Rhett slave quarters – with their original paint, floors and fixtures – survive virtually untouched since the 1850s, allowing visitors the unique chance to better comprehend the every-day realities of the enslaved Africans who lived on-site.”<sup>147</sup> The Foundation’s leadership wanted to highlight that unique historic feature of the house. This first audio guide began to be outdated by the late 2000s. The desire to update their audio guide came from two motivating factors. First, the museum had conducted separate historic structures reports on the house and the outbuildings. With this research, the museum conducted archeological studies of the laundry building, finding over 10,000 artifacts, giving the museum

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

insight into the life and work of the enslaved laundresses at the house. Additionally, the museum had conducted research into the enslaved people and free people of color working at the house and discovered powerful stories about these people. The museum then worked with MuseumHack, a company that specializes in creating relevant tours that “attract new audiences and maximize visitor engagement”<sup>148</sup> to rewrite their audio tour. In October of 2018 the museum launched a new audio guide that ensured all the stories were discussed equally, favoring no particular story over another.<sup>149</sup> Today the Aiken-Rhett House’s fundamental programming tells a diverse story of the people of the house. Subsequently, the museum developed additional tours and programs designed to tell stories of people other than the Aiken’s. One of these tours is called Beyond the Big House. This tour is led by a professional storyteller who takes people through the outbuildings and enslaved people’s quarters highlighting their stories.<sup>150</sup>

Beyond telling these diverse stories with their audio guide, the museum also encourages visitors and staff to engage with these stories and use them to gain new understandings and develop new interpretations of history. As the house made changes to how it tells stories, the staff had to be willing and ready to accept those changes. Therefore, museum staff went through intensive training that included working with Joe McGill from the Slave Dwelling Project; Bernard Powers, a history professor at the College of Charleston; and Sean Halifax, a former employee at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>151</sup> These workshops gave staff members the opportunity to gain a new understanding of the importance of these diverse narratives and to develop new interpretations of this history for

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<sup>148</sup> “We Develop World Class Tour Experiences For Your Museum & Train Your Staff to Facilitate Them,” Museum Hack, Museum Hack, last modified 2019, <https://museumhack.com/museum-consulting/tour-development/>.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Aiken-Rhett House Staff, interview by author, July 23, 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

themselves. For example, after a training session, one staff member commented that all of Charleston is affected by racial issues, and these issues have been affecting the city for its entire history. It was an idea that never occurred to her before and she needed an outside perspective to help her see this history of Charleston.<sup>152</sup>

The Aiken-Rhett House's efforts to tell diverse narratives have been successful. The audio tours, both the 1999 and 2018 versions, are popular and receive positive feedback. Museum staff indicate anecdotally that 99% of visitors are thrilled with the tour and respond with such comments as, "Oh my gosh, I just learned so much [about the enslaved people.] There were no freedoms!"<sup>153</sup> The museum measures success in other ways beyond anecdotal evidence and visitor feedback. For example, one measure of success for the Beyond the Big House tour is the number of attendees. Each year the program has run, it has had over 350 participants, nearly reaching total capacity.<sup>154</sup> According to the Foundation's website, it is their goal "to challenge conventional thinking. To listen to everyone's memories and stories – and share them with the world. To collaborate with a diverse mix of citizens, public servants, organizations, and neighborhoods to ensure our city is a place we can all call home."<sup>155</sup> Including diverse stories and narratives in their storytelling is one way the museum can meet the Foundation's goal.

#### **Best Practice #4: Making the Human Connection**

##### Case Study from the Beauford Keyes House

The Beauford Keyes House in New Orleans, Louisiana earns its name from only two of its former residents: Confederate General P.G. T. Beauford and 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist author, Frances Parkinson Keyes. However, the home's famous namesakes fail to tell the complete story

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> "Honor What Makes Us," Historic Charleston.

of the all the people who lived and worked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century house. Today, the museum makes the human connection in their storytelling by personalizing the rooms of the house, providing tours led by people and sharing the personalities of the house's various former residents.

Located in the French Quarter, the building was built in 1826, commissioned by Joseph Essau LeCarpentier, an auctioneer in the city and an immigrant from Haiti. The home was sold in 1833 and was owned by various people until it was purchased by Dominique Lanata, a Genoan businessman in 1865, who rented the home to various tenants, including Confederate General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard who lived in the house with his family for only 18 months. The building was slated for destruction in 1925 but purchased by a group of women who wanted to save the house and turn it into a memorial for Beauregard. Unable to raise the necessary funds, the building served as a homeless shelter, meeting place, rest stop and housing center for WWII soldiers, and was rented out to tenants including Frances Parkinson Keyes who moved into the second floor in 1944. Keyes wrote several of her famous novels while living in the house and died in the home in 1970. The Keyes Foundation, which she established, operates the museum today.<sup>156</sup>

Visitors today take a docent-led tour exploring the period rooms in the house, staged to reflect different time periods in the home's history. The museum staff maintain a philosophy that visiting a historic house museum is the most personal way of learning about the past for the home is the most personal representation of how people actually lived in the past.<sup>157</sup> This philosophy influences the presentation and interpretation of the period rooms. The museum aims to make each period room seem as if people actually lived in the space. The museum uses carpet runways instead of stanchions, allowing visitors to walk directly into each room. While some of

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<sup>156</sup> "Learn," BKHouse, Beauregard Keyes House, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.bkhouse.org/learn>.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Beauregard Keyes House Staff, interview by author, April 17, 2019.

the rooms, such as Mrs. Keyes' writing studio, have been left almost exactly as she left it, the museum staff sets out objects such as bibles, rosaries, dolls, and toiletries to make the rooms on tour seem more like a room in the home of a living person. The tour guides then use these objects as points of interpretation to have a discussion with visitors about the former occupants as if they were still in the house. For example, a bible belonging to Mrs. Keyes is used to illustrate her views on religion and a porcelain dolls is referenced as one of the occupants' favorite toys as a child. The museum believes that using these objects to give more information about the former occupants helps visitors feel more like they are visiting a home, rather than a museum.

Additionally, docent-led tours are another important component of making the human connection at the Beauregard Keyes House. The museum feels strongly that real people sharing stories with visitors in real time—as opposed to videos or audio guides—is the best way to talk about their historic residents.<sup>158</sup> Some of the museum's former inhabitants have complicated personalities, as the museum's former occupants include owners of enslaved people and a Confederate General. These complicated personalities have the ability to make some visitors uncomfortable. However, the museum feels strongly that allowing real people to share these complicated stories helps visitors understand these personalities. The museum believes that tour guides can present the most complete image possible of these individuals, thus allowing visitors the opportunity to come to their own conclusions about each former resident. For example, Joseph Essau LeCarpentier, the first resident of the house, was an auctioneer in the slave trade. Tour guides openly discuss LeCarpentier's beliefs and actions as well as the enslaved people who lived and worked at the house. Using real people in real time, also allows visitors to field

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.



questions and receive immediate answers and get a more complete understanding of the personalities of the former occupants.<sup>159</sup>

The Beauregard Keyes House has found success by making the human connection in their stories. Through exit surveys and anecdotal evidence, the museum staff report that visitors find it easier to relate to the stories in the house because the people in the house are made to seem so real.<sup>160</sup> According to museum staff, the visitors now come to the house and expect these human stories to be told. As every tour guide gives a slightly different tour, some visitors return just to have a different tour guide.<sup>161</sup> This interpretative approach allows visitors to see the real and flawed images of the former inhabitants and ultimately, makes these figures seem more human than historic. As one museum staff member said, “this really is a living, breathing house and our visitors recognize it.”<sup>162</sup>

### Case Study from Hickory Hill

Like the Beauregard Keyes House, Hickory Hill in Thomson, Georgia makes the human connection to successfully tell stories. The staff at Hickory Hill use the historic appearance of the home, cater to specific visitor interests, and humanize their former residents. Hickory Hill was the home of Tom Watson. Watson was born in 1863 and grew up in poverty in Reconstruction-era Georgia. He became an attorney in 1875 and began practicing law in Thomson where he quickly earned a reputation as an eloquent and powerful lawyer. He was elected to Congress in 1890, ran as the Vice President on William Jennings Bryan’s ticket in the election of 1896, and was eventually elected the State Senate in 1920. He purchased Hickory

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

Hill in 1900 and officially moved in 1904 with his wife and children. While in office, he moved between Georgia and Maryland, but he was returned to his home in 1922 upon his death and his funeral was held at Hickory Hill.

Hickory Hill offers visitors guided tours but does not use docents like many historic house museums. Instead museum visitors take guided tours with one of the professional staff members. Museum staff note that visitors enjoy this tour structure and have commented that they are “amazed to have a tour from the curator or the educator.”<sup>163</sup> Visitors see the house much as it looked like when the Watsons lived there. According to the museum’s website, the historic house has been restored to appear as it did when Tom Watson lived in the home in the 1920s. “Most of the furniture belonged to Watson and is placed in its original location. . . . Period wallpapers have been recreated from fragmentary evidence. Victorian lighting illuminated the rooms; artwork original to the house once again hangs in correct locations.”<sup>164</sup> This suggests that the museum staff at Hickory Hill want visitors to feel like they are stepping back in time when they walk into the home instead of stepping into a museum. Not every museum has this luxury for not every historic house has the objects required to make this happen. For example, the Ulysses S Grant Historic Site has no original furniture inside the White Haven estate, and the lack of it disappoints visitors.<sup>165</sup> Staging and interpreting the rooms of a historic house museum to be like historic rooms instead of objects on display makes it easier for visitors to see the former residents in that space as well as themselves in the space. It allows for a more familiar and engaging connection to be made between the museum space and the visitor.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Hickory Hill Staff, interview by email, April 10, 2019.

<sup>164</sup> “The Home,” Hickory Hill.

<sup>165</sup> Nick Sacco, “Many Historic House Museum Tours Are Boring Because They Lack a Human Element,” Past Explore, Exploring the Past, Blog, last modified October 28, 2016, <https://pastexplore.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/many-historic-house-museum-tours-are-boring-because-they-lack-a-human-element/>.

<sup>166</sup> Silverman, *Personalizing the Past*, 8.

Additionally, the museum uses their objects to give a more complete image of the personalities and flaws of their former occupants. Museum staff explain that the Watsons “were people who made mistakes, had unpopular views (by modern standards), experienced joy and sorrow, got sick, suffered mental illness...why not talk about it?”<sup>167</sup> The museum uses hands-on, “interactive pieces in the house that people can explore that provide the springboard for the difficult political and racial discussions [that sometimes happen during a tour.]”<sup>168</sup> For example, copies of two seditious pamphlets written by Watson are laminated and on display in the house: one about obscene literature and the other about violating the Alien and Sedition Acts. These pamphlets serve as an opportunity for staff to discuss some of Watson’s more unknown and complicated views and ideas, while also serving as an opportunity for dialogues about politics, race, economics, and social class. The museum staff use these pamphlets to show visitors that the people who lived at Hickory Hill had just as strong ideas and opinions and were just as flawed as people today.

Additionally, Hickory Hill makes the human connection by catering tours and stories to visitors’ specific interests. Similar to the Beaugard Keyes House, museum staff at Hickory Hill believe that a tour should be guided by a live person instead of an audio guide or wall text. Hickory Hill staff believe that this human connection on the tour allows the tour to be more flexible to fit the interests of the visitor. Staff start every tour by asking the visitors what brought them to the house, and then build a tour around those visitors’ interests. By developing a new tour that is specifically catered to each new visitor, the museum staff helps keep visitors more engaged in the content, which ultimately helps them better understand Watson and his viewpoints. However, the success of this method has come with its own set of unique challenges

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<sup>167</sup> Hickory Hill Staff, interview.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

as staff members find themselves giving two-to-three-hour tours if groups are especially interested in Watson's stories and have a lot of questions.

Hickory Hill's effort to make the human connection has proven successful. As the museum officially measures success through visitor comments and repeat visitation, museum staff find that visitors often come back to hear the other stories. Additionally, museum staff agree that helping visitors see a new viewpoint is proof of successful storytelling. For example, one Catholic visitor to Hickory Hill was frustrated that the museum was honoring Watson, as he was openly anti-Catholic. The museum staff were able to use Watson's own writings in the house to show the visitor that Watson's feelings against the Catholic Church stemmed from his concerns over sexual misconduct from priests. At the end of the conversation, the museum staff successfully helped this visitor view history from a different perspective, as he apologized for the behavior of the Catholic church and thanked the museum staff for helping him understand Watson's stance on the church.<sup>169</sup> As the museum aims to use Watson's political, social, and economic views as a means to help visitors make a deeper connection between themselves and Watson, they considered this interaction with the Catholic visitor a success.<sup>170</sup> Hickory Hill tells the story of man and his family with radical ideas in a very turbulent time in American history. Their storytelling success provides an excellent example of how historic house museums can make the human connection.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Five:

### Case Studies—Looking Out

#### Looking Out

Some museums look to their communities to develop stories that make the history seem more relevant to the modern visitor. Storytelling that is outwardly focused seeks to make connections between the institution and the audiences they are trying to reach by using resources outside of the walls of the museum. Outwardly-focused storytelling is about the relationship between the historic house museum, the museum's audience, and the people about whom the stories are being told. The two best practices that 'look out' include best practice #2: Connect the Past to the Present and best practice #3: Build Shared Authority. To make connections between the past and the present for visitors, the museum needs to look beyond its walls to find points of relevance that link the house's history with the visitors' experiences and engage in conversations surrounding social justice issues. Similarly, a historic house museum must look out to the community to build shared authority, letting community members be a part of choosing which stories to tell as well as the storytellers themselves. The Wyckoff House Museum and the Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum as well as Cliveden and Laramie Plains are institutional leaders for following these outward-looking best practices for storytelling.

#### **Best Practice #2: Connect the Past to the Present**

##### Case Study from the Wyckoff House Museum

The Wyckoff House Museum in Brooklyn, New York aims to connect their visitors to the past through their approach to storytelling. The original farmhouse was built in 1652 by Pieter Claesen in what was then the city of New Amsterdam. Claesen had come to New Netherlands in

1637 as an indentured servant but was eventually able to buy property upon which he built a one room for his wife and 11 children. The house remained in the Wyckoff family for the next eight generations and underwent many expansions including the addition of five new rooms, and it 1982, it was opened as a museum.<sup>171</sup> Today, the interior of the house tells the story of Claesen and his family, as well as a broader story of immigration to the United States. Visitors experience the museum at their own pace with museum staff on site to answer questions. The museum additionally includes a garden and green space that is used as interpretative place for storytelling and a vehicle for connecting the past to the present. The museum’s commitment to making these connections is evident in their mission statement: “The Wyckoff House Museum preserves, interprets, and operates New York City’s oldest building and the surrounding one-and-a-half acres of park. Through innovative educational and farm-based programs we build cultural and agricultural connections within our community, emphasizing immigration, family, food, and community through history.”<sup>172</sup>

One way the Wyckoff House Museum connects the past to the present is by focusing their stories on themes that resonate with modern visitors. One of the major themes of the Wyckoff house is immigration, as Claesen himself was an immigrant. The museum staff believe that this theme of immigration resonates with all visitors as everyone has some connection to starting something new—whether that’s moving to a new country, starting a new job, or just the first day at a new school.<sup>173</sup> Museum staff emphasize this concept of newness to help visitors make a personal connection between their lives and Claesen’s life. One way the Wyckoff museum emphasizes this theme is through their Protest Garden project. This project invites

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<sup>171</sup> “History,” Wyckoff House Museum, Wyckoff House Museum & Association Inc., last modified 2015, <https://wyckoffmuseum.org/about/history/>.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview by author, July 1, 2019.

artists to share their work in the museum's gardens while the museum offers "a series of free workshops with local artists exploring and interacting with themes such as activism, protest, respite, and self-care."<sup>174</sup> The Protest Garden is often interactive. For example, one workshop in the garden invited visitors to write down their hopes, dreams, and challenges of starting something new and leave these notes in the garden. This allowed visitors to tell their own stories while hopefully making a deeper connection to the Claesen family and their descendants who also held hopes and dreams and struggled with their own challenges as they adjusted to their new life as immigrants.

Beyond making connections between the lives of the Wyckoff family and the visitors, the museum engages in conversations about issues of social justice, primarily focusing on issues of immigration and food justice, as both of these issues affected the Wyckoff family and still affect the museum's community. Today, New York City is home to 3.1 million immigrants<sup>175</sup> and many communities in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx still struggle with access to healthy foods.<sup>176</sup> One way the museum tells these stories is through their artist-in-residence program, using the artist's work as a catalyst for connecting people to the themes of the museum. For example, a recent artist in the program discussed issues of identity and immigration through an art project that wove words into a fence with ribbon. The artist attended several events at the museum and listened to the stories that visitors shared surrounding these issues and then used those stories to create a phrase woven into the fence around the museum. The phrase read: "Stories tell of loss. Each new land allows new dreams." Hidden in that phrase was a cry

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<sup>174</sup> "Upcoming Events>Protest Garden!" Wyckoff House Museum, Wyckoff House Museum & Association Inc., last modified 2015, <https://wyckoffmuseum.org/calendar/category/protest-garden/photo/>.

<sup>175</sup> New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, *State of Our Immigrant City*, Annual Report, March 2018, 6, [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/moia\\_annual\\_report\\_2018\\_final.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/moia_annual_report_2018_final.pdf).

<sup>176</sup> Edward Helmore, "One community garden at a time: how New Yorkers are fighting for food justice," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/12/new-york-city-food-justice-community-garden-libertad-urban-farm>.

against the issues of immigration in this country; phrase was actually an anagram, as the combined first letter of each word spelled out “Stolen Land.”<sup>177</sup> With this project, the artist used stories shared at the museum to raise awareness of a present day issue that intimately ties back to Claesen’s story, and which hopefully will encourage other visitors to share their stories and connections with immigration and the idea of something new.

The Wyckoff’s approach to storytelling by connecting the past to the present is successful. The museum has become a space where visitors can safely share their stories. For example, when the Protest Garden project had visitors write their own stories, visitors left stories of all kinds—stories of happy times, stories that admitted secrets, and other deeply personal stories. Storytelling that connects the past to the present aims to find ways that the visitor can connect on a deeper level with the stories of the past. The Wyckoff House Museum does more than that; their programming and social justice focus help connect the life experiences of visitors as well.

#### Case Study from Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum

One the other side of the country from Wyckoff House, and with an interpretive period that is almost 200 years later, the Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum in Industry, California connects the past to the present through their storytelling as well. The Homestead Museum uses current topics that have influenced both their former residents and their modern visitors to tell stories that discuss and advocate for broader issues of social justice. The Homestead Museum is comprised of two historic homes. The first, the Workman House, built in 1841, was the home of William and Nicolasa Workman, who had emigrated from Taos, New Mexico, when the greater Los Angeles area was still a part of Mexico. Failed bank investments

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<sup>177</sup> Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview.



in the 1860s led to the family losing their home and land. The family reacquired the home in 1917 by the Workman's grandson, Walter P. Temple, and his wife, Laura, after the discovery of oil on their land. The Temples built the second historic home, La Casa Nuevo, next to the Workman house, and named the property The Homestead. The Temple family lost their wealth in failed investments and lost the Homestead to foreclosure in 1923. Subsequently, the homes were used as a military school and a convalescent hospital until the City of Industry purchased and restored the property and opened the Homestead as a museum in 1981.<sup>178</sup> Visitors today can only go inside the houses on guided tours, but the museum offers a variety of other events and educational programs that aim to tell relevant and compelling stories.

The museum is committed to connecting the public with the Workman and Temple families. According to museum staff, connecting the past to the present is one of the “Four Pillars” of the museum's purpose document: “The last of these pillars says that we will concentrate on ‘The role the past plays in our present and future.’”<sup>179</sup> This suggests that the museum values and seeks out specific opportunities to make these connections to better tell stories for their audience. When the museum staff develop programs and determine which stories to tell they specifically choose topics that have affected Californians in the past and possibly still affect visitors to the house today. For example, the museum offers a program called Female Justice that examines court cases in southern California where women were predominantly involved including the Death of J. Belton Kennedy in 1921, the Sexual Assault Trial of Alexander Pantages in 1929, the Seduction Case of Lillian Ashley in 1896, and the

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<sup>178</sup> “About Us: Who We Are,” Homestead Museum, Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum, accessed July 23, 2019, [https://www.homesteadmuseum.org/about-us/about-us\\_](https://www.homesteadmuseum.org/about-us/about-us_)

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Homestead Museum Staff, interview by author, July 20, 2019.

Murder Trial of Lastenia Abarta in 1881.<sup>180</sup> These stories tie directly into today's #MeToo movement, highlighting abuses and neglect of women. According to museum staff, "[w]e talk a lot about reputation, about media coverage, about how young women are treated by the criminal justice system, and about how the laws we have today were shaped and influenced by these historic cases."<sup>181</sup> Telling stories that allow visitors to see the connections to the #MeToo movement help visitors understand that the past is deeply connected to the present because of history. One museum staff member offers that making this connection is important and when successful, "it genuinely lets people see where they are on the historic timeline, that they are impacted by the actions of people in the past, and that their actions will impact the future."<sup>182</sup>

Impacting the future through social justice work is another goal of the Homestead Museum's efforts to connect the past to the present. Walter P. Temple, who built La Casa Nuevo also founded the town of Temple, California. When this town was founded, it was a white-only city, allowing only white people to buy property in the town, a practice that occurred in many cities in California.<sup>183</sup> According to museum staff, this "is a part of our history that Californians almost completely forget about and is a constant surprise to visitors."<sup>184</sup> California still has issues with race relations related to housing<sup>185</sup> and in one of the most diverse states in the United States,<sup>186</sup> several cities remain predominantly white.<sup>187</sup> This connection between California and

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<sup>180</sup> "Talks and Lectures," Homestead Museum, Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum, accessed July 23, 2019, <https://www.homesteadmuseum.org/upcoming-events/talks-lectures>.

<sup>181</sup> Homestead Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Marisa Kendall, "For whites only: Shocking language found in property docs throughout Bay Area," *The Mercury News*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/02/26/for-whites-only-shocking-language-found-in-property-docs-throughout-bay-area/>.

<sup>184</sup> Homestead Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>185</sup> Mark Vallianatos, "Op-Ed: L.A.'s land use rules were born out of racism and segregation. They're not worth fighting for," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/livable-city/la-oe-vallianatos-sb-827-housing-zoning-20180402-story.html>.

<sup>186</sup> Amarendra Bhushan Dhiraj, "Report: The Least (And The Most) Diverse States In The U.S. For 2018," *CEO Magazine*, September 19, 2018, <https://ceoworld.biz/2018/09/19/report-the-least-and-the-most-diverse-states-in-the-u-s-for-2018/>.

the Temple family history is part of the story told in the museum and used as a discussion point for visitors. This story helps to bring awareness to the continued issues of race in California, in particular racial issues involving access to housing.

The Homestead Museum believes that an important part of successfully connecting visitors to the past is by telling stories that encourage the visitors to actively participate in the storytelling. The Homestead Museum does this on their house tours, by engaging visitors in conversation as a way to help create a tour that “will help the visitor feel connected to the history.”<sup>188</sup> For example one of the tours offered near Valentine’s Day focuses on love letters between various family members. The guides allow time for visitors to share their own stories or thoughts on the love stories seen in the Workman and Temple letters. The museum staff find that visitor responses are often “very thoughtful and personal”<sup>189</sup> suggesting they are able to make a deep connection to their own lives from the stories told at the Homestead Museum. Additionally, the Homestead Museum uses talk-back walls allowing visitors to leave behind their own thoughts and more deeply connect with the stories. These talk-back walls are very popular and museum staff say that visitors “leave notes, stories, or something that is that is their own interpretation of history.”<sup>190</sup> The museum sees this activity and engagement as a success. The Homestead Museum successfully connects the past to the present by discussing historical events that still affect modernity and engaging in conversations surrounding issues of social justice.

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<sup>187</sup> Cities with the Highest Percentage of Whites in California,” Zip Atlas, Zip Atlas, last modified 2019, <http://zipatlas.com/us/ca/city-comparison/percentage-white-population.htm>.

<sup>188</sup> Homestead Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

### **Best Practice #3: Build Shared Authority**

#### Case Study from Cliveden

Museum staff at Cliveden, a historic house museum located in historic Germantown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have taken a unique approach to telling stories and engaging their visitors. Cliveden tells stories through shared authority by creating opportunities where the community can be a part of choosing which stories to tell in the museum and by giving community members a chance to be the storytellers themselves. Cliveden is the historic home of Benjamin Chew, the Chew family, and the Chew servants and enslaved people. The Chew family owned the house from the late 1760s to 1972 when it was donated to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and became a museum.<sup>191</sup> As a museum today, Cliveden seeks to build shared authority, even stating this purpose in their mission: “to engage neighbors by the site’s unique history and help build vibrant communities in Greater Germantown.”<sup>192</sup> This commitment to building shared authority is emphasized in how the museum defines shared authority: by ensuring that stakeholders have inclusive buy-in to what the museum is doing and talking about in its programs and stories.<sup>193</sup> Visitors today can take a guided tour or can choose to tour the house via one of the house tour programs offered at the site. Such programs include a house tour by a costumed storyteller playing James Smith, a free African American man who worked for the Chew family from 1819 to 1871; or watching *Liberty to Go to See*, a dramatic theatrical event that takes visitors through the house and introduces them to costumed interpreters who play various members of the Chew family and their enslaved people and workers.

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<sup>191</sup> “People-Learn More,” Cliveden, Cliveden, accessed August 4, 2019, <http://www.cliveden.org/people-learn-more>.

<sup>192</sup> “Emancipating Cliveden Project,” Cliveden, Cliveden, accessed April 29, 2019, <http://www.cliveden.org/emancipating-cliveden-project/>.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with Cliveden Staff, interview by author, April 29, 2019.

Furthermore, the museum seeks out opportunities to let the community tell their own stories and become storytellers themselves through the Cliveden Institute and Cliveden Conversations. According to the website, this “public speaking forum . . . brings regional and national guest speakers, poets, educators, and historians to ignite conversations in our diverse community for an intellectual and often emotional discussion on race, history, and memory in Philadelphia.”<sup>194</sup> Topics have ranged from gun violence to slavery in the Northern states to cooking. Beyond allowing community members to share their own stories, these conversations give the museum’s community an opportunity to safely air distresses or concerns about the museum’s narratives or stories as well as advice or suggestions about how the museum can better serve its community and tell relevant stories.

An important aspect of building shared authority is seeking feedback from visitors. All programs at Cliveden are followed with evaluations. Cliveden staff takes the evaluation feedback seriously, allowing it to inform their programs, exhibits, and stories. For example, feedback from visitors helped Cliveden staff create one of their exhibits which focused on the history of slavery in the Mid-Atlantic region. Community feedback provided the museum with ideas of which topics were most interesting to visitors and more subtle nuances for the exhibits such as word choice (e.g. using ‘enslaved people’ instead of ‘slave.’)<sup>195</sup>

Additionally, the dramatic *Liberty to Go to See* program was the direct result of community feedback from the museum’s annual reenactment of the Battle of Germantown during the Revolutionary War. From visitor surveys, the museum learned that visitors wanted to see reenactments of other aspects of life at Cliveden, beyond the battle. With this strong community interest in seeing other reenactments, the museum developed *Liberty to Go to See*.

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<sup>194</sup> “Cliveden Conversations,” Cliveden, Cliveden, accessed April 29, 2019, <http://www.cliveden.org/cliveden-conversations/>.

<sup>195</sup> Cliveden Staff, interview.

According to the museum’s website, “[t]he title comes from a letter from Joseph, an enslaved worker to his master, Benjamin Chew, requesting permission to accept closer employment to his wife. The production features the lives of the indentured and enslaved workers for the Chew family from the 1760s through the 1860s—men and women whose stories are rarely heard.”<sup>196</sup> This program was developed directly from community interest and was purposefully designed to build upon those community relationships. The program is not only a dramatic tour of the house, but includes an introduction to the program, time for conversations and reflection, and then seeks feedback from participants which will help inform other programs, exhibits, and stories.

Ultimately, Cliveden has been successful at building shared authority. Programs like *Liberty to Go to See* and *Cliveden Conversations* regularly sell out, indicating they are popular community programs. Furthermore, Cliveden’s staff believe that giving their community and visitors a chance to be directly involved with the storytelling helps the museum better determine its successes and its struggles in terms of its storytelling. It helps the museum feel more relevant to the community and it allows the museum to be seen as a more welcoming and safe space for other community functions.<sup>197</sup> In part, thanks to the museum’s effort to include the community in their narratives, the museum spaces are now more regularly used by other local organizations for conferences and recreation such as meetings of the local police agency and goat yoga from a local arboretum. Additionally, people more regularly use the city-block of green space owned by the museum as a park.<sup>198</sup> Cliveden is now truly benefitting from successfully telling stories through shared authority.

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<sup>196</sup> “Liberty to Go to See Curriculum,” Cliveden, Cliveden, accessed April 29, 2019, <http://www.cliveden.org/liberty-go-see-curriculum/>.

<sup>197</sup> Cliveden Staff, interview.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

## Case Study from Laramie Plains at the Historic Ivinson Mansion

Laramie Plains at the Historic Ivinson Mansion, in Laramie, Wyoming uses shared authority by allowing its community to be the storytellers and develop their own stories to tell in the house. This historic house dating from before Wyoming was a state, tells the story of Edward Ivinson and his family, but also tells the history of the community in Laramie Plains from its start as a railroad town to today. Therefore, shared authority is a central idea of the museum as many of the stories told at the house come directly from their community. The history of the Ivinson house begins when Edward, Jane, and Maggie Ivinson arrived in Laramie City in the Dakota Territory on May 10, 1868 on one of the first passenger trains into the town. Edward purchased a local bank in 1871 and commenced a 50-year banking career, amassing a substantial fortune.<sup>199</sup> In 1893, the family completed their work on Ivinson Mansion. After the death of Jane, Edward gave his home to the Episcopal Missionary District of Wyoming in 1921 where it served as a boarding school for girls.<sup>200</sup> The Laramie Plains Museum Association purchased the house in 1972 with the goal of providing a new space for the growing Laramie Plains Museum managed by the Association which saved “items of area history throughout the first half of the 20th century.”<sup>201</sup> The Association “led [the] community in a [fundraising] drive to save the historic property,”<sup>202</sup> thus forming an early deep connection with the community. Today the museum still values its deep connection with its community. According to staff at Laramie Plains, “the basis of our institution is built on shared authority and is an essential part of how our museum views and interprets history.”<sup>203</sup> The museum defines shared authority as

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<sup>199</sup> “Iverson Family History,” Laramie Museum, Laramie Plains Museum, accessed August 4, 2019, <http://laramiemuseum.org/historyofivinsonfamily.html>.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> “Saving the Mansion,” Laramie Museum, Laramie Plains Museum, Accessed August 4, 2019, <http://laramiemuseum.org/mansion.html>.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Laramie Plains Staff, interview by email, July 31, 2019.

inclusiveness: “we invite and seek information about the people and events from descendants of Laramie’s pioneers and other community members to enrich our narrative of the Ivinson Mansion and of Laramie.”<sup>204</sup>

Visitors to the Ivinson Mansion today take a guided tour of the house. The house has three floors of period rooms that discuss the Ivinson family, their connection and influence in the early days of Wyoming, and the history of Laramie Plains as a community. One way the museum uses shared authority to enrich these narratives is by “inviting the community to be active members of the museum by sharing their family stories.” To do this, the museum worked with the local library to collect hundreds of oral histories of Laramie residents. While these oral histories are not a central part of the house tour, they provide a valuable collection of resources and research about the town and the community. Besides oral histories, the museum gives community members the chance to be storytellers themselves. Each year the museum hosts a series of high teas, where they invite community members to come and present on a local topic of interest. These teas are inspired by the house’s history. While the house was a boarding school, the girls would attend tea at the Ivinson Mansion and would host dances for the community at the house as well. The museum wanted to replicate this community-focused approach in their programming and went a step further by inviting community members to be storytellers at these events. The museum values giving community members a chance to be storytellers because museum staff believe that when community members can share their own stories, it gives them a sense of ownership, which can lead to continued community support in terms of monetary or object donation, volunteering, or promoting the museum.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.



Laramie Plains recognizes that anyone can be a stakeholder and seeks out opportunities to let as many different community members as possible decide what stories should be told in the house. One of the ways they do this through their Junior Docent program. Most docents in the house are “senior docents,” some volunteers and many being senior citizens.<sup>206</sup> The museum wanted to expand the types of stories told in the house by diversifying who was choosing the stories to tell. As each docent guide creates their own tours and chooses which stories to tell as they take guests through the three floors of the house, the museum sought out a different age group from the majority of their docents. The Junior Docent program works with local high school teachers who provide names of interested 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who are then invited to volunteer at the museum over the summer as a docent. Using community members of a variety of ages and backgrounds as docents allows the museum to give their community members another opportunity to choose which stories are told within the museum. Museum staff believe that the more stories told in their museum the better because “[h]istory is complex and perspective is extremely important when looking at an event.” With both senior and junior docents, the museum aims to provide visitors with multiple perspectives on the history of the Iverson’s and Laramie. Letting the community members chose which stories to tell and letting them be storytellers themselves gives the community an opportunity to decide what stories are being told in the museum.

The staff at Laramie Plains have found that this approach to storytelling is successful. As the museum measures success in attendance, events like the high teas are often sold out. Additionally, tours from junior docents regularly receive excellent reviews, and the museum staff agree that the students “have always proven to be exceptional and often receive praise for their

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

tours.”<sup>207</sup> These events and others at the museum that have been built by shared authority showcase the strength of Laramie Plain’s efforts to work with their community. As one museum staff member says, there is an important “symbiotic relationship between those who run the museum with those who support the museum. . . . [and] we are always learning new things about the people who were a part of our history which continues to enrich our perspective and make it inclusive.”<sup>208</sup>

### **Conclusion to the Case Studies:**

Historic house museum professionals use many different avenues and techniques to tell their stories. Some storytelling techniques are inwardly focused, looking in at how strong leadership, strategic planning, and thoughtful resource allocation lead to development of how the museum uses their spaces, objects, and lives of former inhabitants to tell successful stories. Other storytelling practices look outside of the museums walls to make connections between the community and the museum’s history. While each house museum tells stories in the way that best suits their house and their collection, historic house museums can learn from each other. I identified eight historic house museums as institutional leaders in the field of best practices for storytelling; these museums were interviewed to share their storytelling techniques. While each of these museums tell stories in their own unique ways, they all succeed in telling stories while following at least one of the identified best practices: including diverse stories and narratives, connecting the past to the present, building shared authority, and making the human connection. These eight museums all exemplify the idea that museums can best learn from each other as each of these museums were willing to share their successes in the hopes that their ideas could

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

become recommendations for other historic house museums seeking tools to tell relevant and compelling stories.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Recommendations**

The historic house museum field is staffed by professionals who often willingly share their successes and challenges concerning all types of issues that affect their respective museums. The case study institutions of Chapters Four and Five exemplify this understanding. These eight historic house museums have become exemplars in the field for storytelling and ultimately want other historic house museums to do the same.

After having researched the professional literature, identified four best practices, built a survey instrument, surveyed 171 historic house museums, interviewed eight institutional leaders, and developed case studies for each of these eight museums, I conclude this thesis with the following five recommendations for each best practice in storytelling. These recommendations are intended to be flexible and adjustable to any historic house museum, but ultimately I anticipate they will help lead the field to telling stronger, more compelling stories.

#### **Best Practice #1: Include Diverse Stories and Narratives**

1. Recognize the stories you are not telling: The first thing that needs to happen in order to tell diverse stories is to recognize what stories are not being told. This can happen in several ways. For both the Montclair History Center and the Aiken-Rhett House, the museums' respective boards recognized the limitations of the museums' interpretation. However, the board does not have to be the initiating force. Community members might be invited to share stories, or other staff members may discover stories of former inhabitants that have yet to be told. Therefore, any staff member that learns of a new story that will diversify the interpretation has an opportunity and obligation to make that story a part of the museum's overall narrative.

2. Accept new stories and interpretation as part of your museum: Once these stories have been discovered, museum staff must embrace these stories and these interpretations of history and accept them as part of the museum's primary narrative, not just a side story. Accepting the inclusion of diverse narratives involves gaining the support of the board and ensuring that telling diverse stories is a part of the museum's mission or goals. For the Aiken-Rhett House the inclusion of a diverse narrative is part of the Foundation's mission, one of the goals of the house itself, and a philosophy held by the staff.<sup>209</sup> The entire museum has to accept the change in the narrative, for if one department of the museum is not on board, the narratives could lose strength and meaning with the visitor.
3. Do your research: Both the Montclair History Center and the Aiken-Rhett House conducted research about their former occupants to help them diversify their narratives. This research looked very different for each house; the Montclair History Center went through local archives and the Aiken-Rhett House conducted archeological digs.<sup>210</sup> Stories often come to historic house museums in pieces, so conducting research on the missing pieces of the story is important to building a story that looks and feels complete. These diverse stories should be part of the main narrative of the house and need to be as complete as possible.
4. Seek outside help: In today's society where inclusion and diversity are recognized as vital aspects of society, many people have become experts in advocating for diverse narratives. Museums should seek help from these outside experts in their research and training. The Montclair History Center used a museum education consultant to help with the research

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<sup>209</sup> Aiken-Rhett House Staff, interview.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., Montclair History Center Staff, interview.

and the redesign of their Many Voices tour.<sup>211</sup> The Aiken-Rhett House sought out experts both from the museum field and from academia to help train their staff on how to appropriately tell these diverse narratives.<sup>212</sup> Seeking outside help can save museum staff time and can ensure that the new diverse narratives are told in the best and most inclusive way possible.<sup>213</sup>

5. Work continuously toward your goal: The ultimate goal of telling diverse stories is to build trust within the community, but trust building takes time. For the Montclair History Center, trust was hard to earn because they had ignored their diverse stories for a long time. However, over several years of working continuously to tell diverse stories, the museum has built a more trusting relationship with their community. This process of telling diverse stories never ends, and in order to sustain that community trust, a museum must always seek new ways to tell those diverse, inclusive stories.

## **Best Practice #2: Connect the Past to the Present**

1. Be inspired by your staff: Making the conscious effort to connect the past to the present has to be a museum decision that is supported by the museum staff. For example, the stories told and connections made at the Homestead Museum are influenced by the staff. The same happens at the Wyckoff Museum. For example, the staff at the Wyckoff Museum were inspired to start the artist-in-residence program because one senior staff member has a background in art and was inspired by her educational interests.<sup>214</sup> A project idea that comes from what interests the staff helps to ensure that the staff wholeheartedly support telling those stories. To successfully make these connections between

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<sup>211</sup> Montclair History Center Staff, interview.

<sup>212</sup> Aiken-Rhett House Staff, interview.

<sup>213</sup> Nelson and Pharaon, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>214</sup> Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview.

the past and the present, everyone at the museum needs to willingly be a part of the process. Starting with inspiration from your staff makes it easier to get other facets of the museum focused on making those connections as well.

2. Make it an underlying principle of your museum: Successfully connecting the past to the present must come from more than just the staff. The entire museum must work towards this goal and it needs to become an underlying principle of your museum. For the Homestead Museum, making this connection is a part of their purpose statement and for the Wyckoff House Museum it is a core philosophy.<sup>215</sup> Your board needs to be involved and willing to tell stories to make this connection.
3. Use the history of the house: Sometimes the hardest component of connecting the past to the present is identifying what topics or what points of interest should be used to make those connections. Museum staff should look to the history of the house to make connections to the present. For example, the original occupants of the Wyckoff House Museum were immigrants.<sup>216</sup> This creates an easy connection to Brooklyn and New York City—a city full of immigrants and famous for its connection to immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. Ultimately, museum professionals need to be aware of issues affecting their community and may need to do research on the history of their state and county in order to identify and build connections between history, the house, and the present.
4. Work with your community: Sometimes historic house museums seek connections beyond those that tie into the history of the house. Museums can also make connections through the community and the community's interests. For example, the Homestead

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<sup>215</sup> Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview. Homestead Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>216</sup> Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview.

Museum connects their stories through the #MeToo social justice movement. While their houses have no real connection to the #MeToo movement, the community was interested in this current topic,<sup>217</sup> so the museum found a connection between itself and California's history to create stories about female justice.<sup>218</sup> Similarly, the Wyckoff House Museum uses a community advisory board to suggest new topics and uses community artists to tell stories with their Protest Garden project.<sup>219</sup>

5. Ensure the connections stay true to your museum: All programming and storytelling needs to stay true to the museum's mission and audience. Sometimes museums make connections to popular topics because inclusion of the topic gives the museum funding (whether the topic has a true connection to the historic house museum or not).

Connecting the past to the present is a successful means of storytelling because it makes direct connections with the stories of the house. Strong leadership is needed to ensure the programming and storytelling avoids mission drift that "follows the funding."<sup>220</sup> All of the stories and means of storytelling in a historic house museum need to be mission focused and choosing to tell stories just because of popularity or funding, fails to best serve the museum and its visitors.

### **Best Practice #3: Build Shared Authority**

1. Determine who makes up your community: 'Community' is a term that comes with many different meanings and interpretations. For any museum, an important first step of building shared authority is to understand what 'community' means to your museum. As Laramie Plains understands it, the term means the multiple different groups of people that

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<sup>217</sup> Pharaon, "Discussing Dangerous Topics."

<sup>218</sup> Homestead Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>219</sup> Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview.

<sup>220</sup> American Association of Museums Task Force, "Excellence and Equity," 9; Wyckoff House Museum Staff, interview.



make up Laramie, Wyoming.<sup>221</sup> On the other hand, Cliveden cautions against trying to serve all possible demographics within a museum community because museums cannot be everything for everyone.<sup>222</sup> Museums boards need to truly understand who their audience is and who makes up their community to best understand how their storytelling can have the most impact on their community.

2. Connect with your community: Once a museum has identified who makes up their community, they need to find ways to connect with this audience. Reach out to this desired audience through channels the audience is already familiar with. For example, Laramie Plains contacts juniors in high school for their junior docent programs through high teachers that the students already know. This means that museum staff need to build connections with community leaders outside of the museum to inspire and encourage other community members to become active within the museum.<sup>223</sup> Recognize what interests your audience and use those interests to invite will audience members to take a more active role in the museum.
3. Have a vision and make the vision clear: Finding and connecting with a community is most successful when the community stakeholders understand the museum's plan. Community members give up time and money to be a part of a museum's efforts to build with shared authority. Cliveden cautions museums to be cognizant of people's time and effort.<sup>224</sup> Therefore, community members will be more willing to give freely and often of their time and money when they understand the vision of the museum. Having a clear vision stems from strong leadership and a defined mission. When a museum's leadership

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<sup>221</sup> Laramie Plains Staff, interview.

<sup>222</sup> Cliveden Staff, interview.

<sup>223</sup> AASLH, "How Sustainable is Your Historic House Museum," 5.

<sup>224</sup> Cliveden Staff, interview.

and staff both understand the vision the museum can work more efficiently toward its goals. Having a clear vision and working efficiently towards them will help community members feel like their time is valued and well spent.

4. Complete the promised projects: Once a museum has a clearly defined vision, community members want to see the promised end-product. They want to know that their time and money has been spent wisely by the museum. Cliveden staff recommend that museums should take the time to produce fewer manageable, impactful projects well than to attempt and possibly fail by taking on too many projects for the capacity of the museum's staff and community.<sup>225</sup> When a museum works within its capacity and shows that it completes its promised projects, community members will be more likely to continue working with that museum.
5. Build a relationship and listen: Relationship-building ultimately takes time. Laramie Plains encourages museums to maintain frequent communication and an open dialogue with community members and stakeholders.<sup>226</sup> With this frequent communication, the museum has to listen to the needs and desires of their community. Recognize and acknowledge the effort of the community members that work with the museum. Like all relationships, trust is built over time and the museum needs to be patient and work continuously towards building and maintaining community trust.

#### **Best Practice #4: Make the Human Connection**

1. Accept it as a part of your house: As with all the other best practices, making the human connection must become a tenet of the museum. For the Beauregard Keyes House making the human connection by sharing the personalities of the museum's former

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Laramie Plains Staff, interview.

inhabitants its part of the interpretative plan.<sup>227</sup> For Hickory Hill, making the house look occupied is one of the museum's primary goals.<sup>228</sup> When making the human connection is part of the foundation of the museum, it becomes easier for the museum board, leadership, and staff to make decisions that will continue to strengthen the human connection between the house and its visitors. Ultimately when the human connection becomes a tenant of the museum it becomes a more natural part of the storytelling process.

2. Find diverse storytellers to connect people to people: People make the best human connection with other people. While museums still need to balance the use of technology and exhibit text, the use of people as storytellers cannot be entirely abandoned. Historic house museums should seek tour guides and staff of diverse backgrounds, ages, and worldviews as everyone will bring a different perspective to the stories of the house. In this way, the museum can offer tours and stories that will connect with a more diverse group of people.
3. Take time to train your staff: When museums have people as the primary storytellers, it is important to ensure they are properly trained to do so. Many historic house museums often skip training or only offer limited training due to lack of time and resources. However, training is important to ensure that the stories are being told in the most appropriate ways possible. Depending on the needs and resources of your museum, staff trainings can look and feel very different between different museums.
4. Don't be afraid to tell stories in unique ways: There is no one correct way to tell stories that make the human connection. While many historic house museums, including the

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<sup>227</sup> Beauregard Keyes House Staff, interview

<sup>228</sup> Hickory Hill Staff, interview.

Beauregard Keyes House and Hickory Hill employ guided house tours, the human connection can be made with other kinds of tours and stories. Tours in multiple languages, tours designed for children with touch objects, or self-guided tours are all options of unique ways to give a tour that still make the human connection. Hickory Hill staff offer a different tour every time as the tour is specifically focused on visitor interest. There is no specified correct way to give a tour. As long as the stories can be told in a way that makes a connection between the visitors and the former inhabitants of the house, tours variation is only limited by your imagination.

5. Make it an authentic experience: When visitors come to the house, no matter what type of tour they experience, they should feel like they have had an authentic experience. Part of this process is ensuring the house itself looks like it did (or as close as possible) to when the family originally lived there. For both the Beauregard Keyes House and Hickory Hill, they have some pictures of some of the rooms in the house to use as a reference for their interpretation, but both museums have done research on what the other rooms may have looked like.<sup>229</sup> This approach helps visitors feel like they have stepped back in time, but an accurate placement of objects and furniture is not enough. The information provided to the visitors about those objects and the people that used them must also be accurate and honest. When visitors feel like they can trust the information presented to them, it will be easier for them to make the human connection between the house, the tour guides, the former occupants and themselves.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Hickory Hill Staff, interview.

<sup>230</sup> Silverman, "Personalizing the Past," 8.

The case study institutions from Chapters Four and Five were from eight different historic house museums, in eight different states, with eight different missions, telling eight different stories. Despite their differences, these museums have a few things in common as they tell successful stories. First, successful storytelling takes time. None of the eight museums became institutional leaders overnight. They all worked over time to find and create stories and they all agree that the work is never done and can always be improved upon. Second, the staff at all eight of the museums are committed to telling successful and powerful stories. Each museum recognized that the desire to tell compelling and relevant stories must be present among the staff, because the staff are often the driving forces of change that lead to new and successful stories in these museums. Third, each museum uses storytelling as a means to better serve their visitors. Museums are visitor-centered institutions and they need to be focused on ensuring the best possible experience for their visitors. All eight of these institutional leaders use storytelling to achieve that goal. Finally, storytelling is a never-ending process. No matter what best practice these museums excel at—including diverse stories and narratives, connecting the past to the present, building shared authority, or making the human connection—they all agree that they can always try something new, find a new resource, and tell a new story. It is a process that is vital to the success of a historic house museum, and it is a process, like history, that is continuous.

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