

The Historic Dimension Series

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Many historic houses have been saved through community members' efforts to preserve and transform them into museums, but is this really a sustainable solution?

Reviving House Museums: Historic Houses as Community Spaces

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In 2013, then National Trust for Historic Preservation president, Stephanie Meeks, stated there are roughly 13,000 house museums in the United States. Associate professor of public history at Appalachian State University Andrea Burns claims most of these museums have no full-time paid staff members and a low annual budget, under \$50,000. Several house museums have become known for the prominent families that inhabited them or as examples of architectural styles from a significant period. However, many argue that they have more to offer. This brief will discuss the issues historic house museums faced in recent years and the future of historic houses in America, including two examples that have been transformed to serve their communities.

House Museums: A Call For Inclusivity

In *The Inclusive Historian's Handbook*, authors Kenneth C. Turino and Nina Zannieri write of the inclusive interpretation house museums can offer. "They provide the unique opportunity to share compelling stories in the most intimate of spaces, the home. They can, if allowed, reflect the lives of the many rather than just the privileged few" (p. 3). They present inclusive interpretation models, calling for a change in house museums to include more diverse voices and stories. These models offered by Turino and Zannieri include ways house museums can make the past relevant to visitors, present themes related to social issues and social justice, and shift focus to include lesser-known

narratives. To do so, they assert house museums need to consider all the residents and the issues, involve stakeholders and the community, cultivate meaningful partnerships, research, seek assistance, and build staff and board buy-in.

Facing Issues

Many public historians and historic preservationists are conflicted between the desire to preserve the history of the house while also recognizing many historic house museums are no longer serving their purpose of engaging with the community. In *The Boston Globe*, an article by Ruth Graham describes the house museum as the "endangered American institution." Graham examines the issues house museums face, as smaller house museums continue to struggle, and the debate surrounding these issues. "Their plight is so drastic that some preservationists are now making an argument that sounds downright blasphemous to defenders of these charming repositories of local history: There are simply too many house museums, and many of them would be better off closing." (para. 2)

While historic house museums make up the broadest subdivision of museums in America, they face decreasing attendance numbers and lack of funding, all while trying to stay relevant in the community. Jessie Hellmann for *The Gazette* writes of this in "Historical House Museums Facing Struggles." Hellman cites the "huge boom" of house museums as Americans seek to preserve their past. "But now some researchers and experts

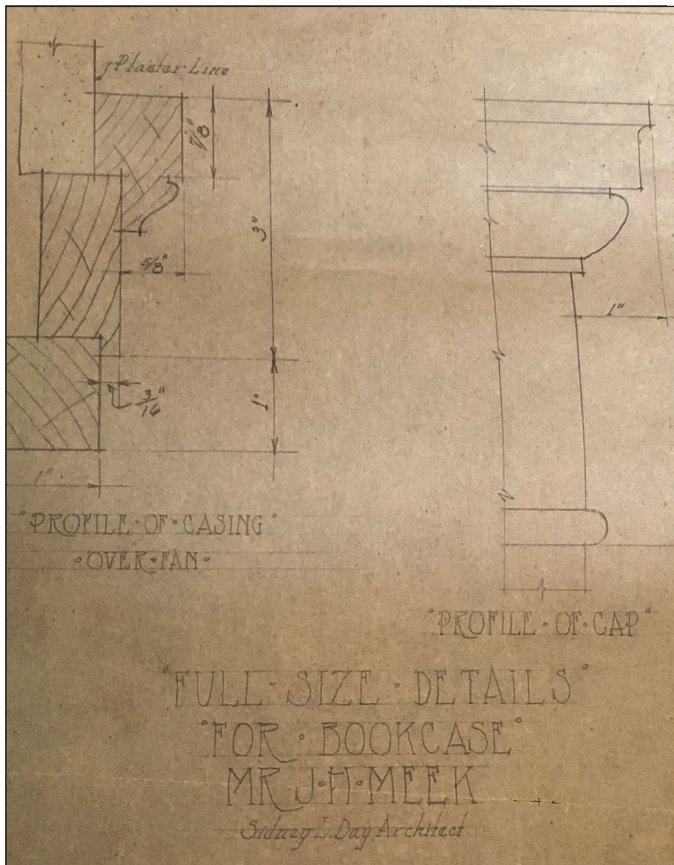


Fig. 2: One of the original designs for the additions to the Johnston-Meek house by architect Sidney L. Day, dated February 16, 1924

are questioning whether turning a house into a museum should be the go-to in preservation, and some have suggested selling properties to private owners may be the best option in some circumstances" (para. 24). Suppose historic house museums are no longer the one-size fits all answer for historic houses with significant histories. How can we continue their preservation while ensuring their relevance within a community?

The Future of Historic Houses in America

Many historic houses have been saved through community members' efforts to preserve and transform them into museums, but is this really a sustainable solution? Ruth Graham reports on sustainability for house museums, citing a speech given by Stephanie Meeks. "Last fall, Meeks delivered a pointed keynote speech at the National Preservation Conference entitled 'House Museums: A 20th-Century Paradigm,' in which she argues that the traditional house museum model is often financially unsustainable and has been drastically overused, and preservationists must look beyond it." If traditional house museum models are proving to be unsuccessful, what measures should be taken to ensure America's historic houses are preserved and utilized in a way that serves the community they belong to and continue to celebrate the history and importance of the structure or site?



Fig. 3: A portrait of Jan Smith Vineyard hangs above the mantel in the living room of Jan's House.

Examining the shortcomings of historic house museums, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* also looks at historic house museums' future. Authors Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan gather five critiques of house museums they use to create a guide for house museums. These five critiques include:

1. "Historic House Museums reflect political and social propaganda, often telling only partial truths."
2. "Historic House Museums have nothing relevant to contribute to conversations."
3. "Historic House Museums are boring."
4. "Historic House Museums have been narrowly curated and do not reflect real life use."
5. "Historic House Museums are too expensive to preserve, and they engage in deceptive conservation practices."

The five critiques presented by Vagnone and Ryan form the organizing structure for their guide, which contains five thematic categories: Community, Communication, Experience, Collections/Environment, and Shelter.

Discussing the thematic category of Community, Vagnone and Ryan address the fact that many historic house museums do not address community wants or needs. "HHMs can be culturally elite and removed. Most are unintentionally off-putting and expect the community to be naturally interested in them" (p. 48). Within the theme of Communication, the authors suggest historic house museums need to communicate diversity to reflect the community they are trying to speak to, become more informal and approachable in their communication style, and listen to create a conversation within the community. Looking at Experience, Vagnone and Ryan suggest using guests' life experience and knowledge as interpretive tools. This guide suggests moving away from a focus that centers on singular objects and, instead, focusing on interaction from a collective environment in the theme of Collections/Environment. Finally, looking at the theme of Shelter, Vagnone and Ryan advocate for the aging and preservation of the house to be integrated within the narrative. Using this guide, Vagnone and Ryan hope the focus on the themes mentioned above



Fig. 4: One of the upstairs bedrooms, now functioning as an office in Jan's House.

will lead to preservation and interpretation as transformation in historic house museums, allowing them to become and stay relevant.

The future of historic houses in America can also be seen outside of house museums. Looking at the adaptive reuse of older buildings, Stephanie Meeks cites the importance of keeping historic properties in active use. Citing the overabundance of house museums in America, she asserts preservation should focus on keeping old buildings alive and in use to play a role in their community, not just by turning them into museums. Meeks' examples of keeping historic properties in active use include: returning a house museum to its original function; creating performance, art and event spaces; schools and former schools; spaces providing community services; and mixed-use and retail spaces.

Every proposed solution to secure the future of historic houses in America focuses on one common theme: speaking to a community's needs. To stay relevant, continue their legacies, safeguard their preservation, and retell their histories, historical houses need to establish themselves as spaces where the community is fostered. The adaptive reuse of historic houses that provide programs or services to the communities they belong to allows them to remain central in a place's history. By fostering community growth and addressing a community's needs, a historic house can be transformed and revitalized, ensuring its preservation.

Jan's House — Huntington, WV

On the corner of Sixth Avenue and Second Street in Huntington, West Virginia, sits a two-story, Colonial Revival style house, thought to be the city's second oldest home. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Johnston-Meek House, it is located in a residential neighborhood, surrounded by several large, two-story houses



Fig. 5: The sunroom, now converted into a conference or meeting space, features a stone hearth created from the original foundation stones.

more simplistic in design, accentuating the ornate design of the home. The property is associated with Huntington's early exploration and settlement in the mid to late 19th century and the Frampton and Johnston families. (Department of the Interior, National Park Service.)

Long before any construction began on the house, the original 400 acres of land were given to an unnamed war hero as part of the original Savage Land Grant for their French and Indian War service. Henry Clark then acquired the property in the 1830s. On this property, Clark built a two-over-two structure from handmade bricks facing the Ohio River, eventually adding on to the house. Sampson Saunders, a successful local businessman, bought the estate in 1843 and used it as a plantation. (DOI. NPS.). Saunders passed in 1849. In his will, Saunders freed the enslaved peoples who worked on the plantation and left them the funds to purchase their own properties. (Heath, 41)

The home's next owners included abolitionists Isaac Frampton and then brothers, William L. and John L. Johnston. The Johnston family acquired more land and used the property as a farm, generating produce and livestock for surrounding cities. Evidence also suggests that the property was part of the Underground Railroad during this time, assisting enslaved individuals in traveling towards freedom (DOI. NPS.) In 1919, John E. Meeks acquired the house where architect Sidney L. Day designed major Colonial Revival additions for the home. (Fig. 2) After his death, John B Meek, son of John H. Meek, inherited the house, adding more additions to the house in 1941, which Day also designed. (DOI. NPS.)



Fig. 6: The children's room, now known as the Thaddeus Carney Room of Courage

In 2002, Carl Baily, a successful general contractor, and his wife Liza Caldwell purchased the home. While paying close attention to the house's historical details, the couple began restoring the home, which had significant water damage by this time. (Heath, 39) The home was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 14, 2004, and, in 2018, the Children's Home Society of West Virginia bought the home.

The Children's Home Society of West Virginia is a private, non-profit child welfare organization that offers child welfare, behavioral health, social casework, and advocacy services from thirteen primary locations across the State of West Virginia. Founded in 1896, Children's Home Society of WV's mission "has been to promote the well-being of all West Virginia children...By collaborating closely with other organizations and institutions across the state, we're working to ensure that every child in West Virginia grows up in a reliable and nurturing family, and that all families are equipped with the tools and support they need to see their children succeed." (CHSWV) This organization offers a wide array of programs and services to serve children and families in West Virginia.

CHSWV bought the house to serve the community further. In 2018, CHSWV dedicated and named the Janet Smith Vineyard Forever Families Center For Permanency, or Jan's House. Named after the late Janet Smith Vineyard, a woman passionate about child welfare and active with the Children's Home Society of West Virginia, "This home will stand for the decades to come so that her inspiration and legacy shall live on. Jan's house will be where homeless children find their forever family, a place for families in crisis to come for support, and



Fig. 7: The garage is now used as a food pantry.

a place in the community that will be known as the home where hope abides. Never-ending and never fading her work shall continue on." (CHSWV)

The Children's Home Society of West Virginia has revived this historic house and, once again, allowed it to serve Huntington's community. Walking through the home, you notice the extensive work done by Carl Baily and Liza Caldwell to restore and preserve the home. Many steps had to be taken by CHSWV to acquire the house and make it suitable for their community programs and services and preserve the house's historic integrity. According to Melody Plumley, the Janet Smith Vineyard Forever Families Center for Permanency Clinical Director, they worked closely with the mayor's office, presented their case at a City Council meeting to get approval for zoning, and passed inspections necessary for a business. Plumley says, "Due to the historical nature of the house, and since it would not house clients, we were allowed to install exit signs that are glow in the dark rather than having to drill into the walls and install the typical electrical exit signs that businesses use."

Walking into the home, the first thing one notices in the living room off the entrance hallway is Jan's portrait on the mantle above the fireplace. At her friends and family's request, the wall above the fireplace is painted a bright pink, Jan's favorite color. (Fig. 3) Throughout the house, every room is utilized to facilitate serving the community. On the first and second floors, bedrooms, the living room, and dining room serve as offices. (Fig. 4) The sunroom has been transformed into a conference room, still featuring the stone hearth created from the house's original foundation stones. (Fig. 5) A room in the center of the first floor is the children's room, complete with stuffed animals and décor to make a child feel welcome. (Fig. 6)

Jan's house offers many resources to children and families of the area. Programs and services housed at this location include:

- Foster Care and Adoption

A Growing Crisis



WV is experiencing a child welfare crisis that is being driven by the drug epidemic

- 83% of open child abuse/neglect cases involve drugs
- Since 2014 the number of youth in the custody of the state has steadily increased. When comparing October 2014 with October 2017, there was a 46% increase.
- 22% increase in accepted abuse/neglect referrals over 3 years
- 34% increase in open CPS cases over 3 years
- Averaging 23% vacancy rate for CPS positions
- 63% of the children entering care are age 10 and younger
- WV is #1 in children removals nationally
- 43% of the children are in kinship/relative placements
- WV adoptions have increased 113% since 2005

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Fig. 8: Statistics on the Child Welfare Crisis in WV from WV DHHR

- Safe at home, providing in-home behavioral health services to youth at risk of being placed outside their home.
- WeCan, a volunteer and mentoring program.
- RPG Wraparound Substance Abuse Program, which provides in-home services to children and families impacted by substance abuse.
- Family and Community Resource Center, complete with a clothing and food pantry to help anyone from the community in need. (Fig. 7)

Reports made by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services (DHHR) in May 2018, West Virginia is facing a child welfare crisis driven by the drug epidemic (Samples, 15) (Fig. 8). Because of this crisis, services like those offered at Jan's House are essential to bettering the lives of those in the surrounding area and building community, something addressed by Vagnone and Ryan in their guide. According to Diana Lucas, the Regional Director for Region 2 with the Children's Home Society of West Virginia, who works out of Jan's House, "Last fiscal year, CHS provided foster care to 716 children, and 139 adoptions were completed." She also states that the work done at Jan's House is essential to the community because: "Every child deserves a loving home where they can feel safe and secure and their physical and emotional needs are met. The work we do brings hope and light to a community that has been plagued with substance misuse, homelessness, food insecurity, and overall economic hardship."

Examining this historic house's use to address community needs, Lucas sites CHS's primary mission: to find homes for children. Because of this mission, it is fitting that a majority of the agency offices throughout the state were previously residential homes. Through their work, the history of the house is revitalized and honored as well. "It is rumored that one of the previous owners provided safety and protection inside the walls of this home to people seeking refuge in their journey to free-



Fig. 9: The Historic Magnolia House.

dom during the days of the Underground Railroad. That owner's mission to protect and nurture those in need is synonymous with CHS's mission and the work the Society has done throughout WV communities for the last 124 years. We consistently strive to keep up with the ever-changing needs of WV children and families and will utilize Jan's House for years and years to come." Lucas also feels the beauty and stature of the house help further their mission. The tall iron fence surrounding the property does not function to keep the community out but as a haven for those seeking support. CHSWV has opened the doors to this magnificent house, allowing it to be enjoyed by those who need it most. The utilization of this house by CHSWV allows for its history to be honored and a continuation of its legacy for years to come, displaying practices reminiscent of those presented in Vagnone and Ryan's theme of Experience.

The house's location within an underserved neighborhood also plays a large role in their ability to address community needs. Lucas states, "Jan's House is exactly where it should be to make the biggest impact in the lives of families. Through our Nancy Tonkin Resource Center, we have been able to help hundreds of suffering people in our community, and I do not believe that would be possible if Jan's House were located elsewhere."

Historic Magnolia House — Greensboro, NC

Located at 442 Gorrell Street, just outside of downtown Greensboro, the Historic Magnolia house is one of only four Green Book Sites in North Carolina still in operation. (Fig. 9) Arthur and Louise Gist purchased the house in 1949, creating the Magnolia Hotel. It was featured in *The Negro Motorist Green Book* during segregation, providing safe housing for African American Travelers. During its time as a hotel, the Magnolia house was con-



Fig. 10: The Historic Magnolia House's display of their features in the Green Book during its time as a hotel.

sidered upscale lodging, serving some of America's most well-known celebrities.

From 1936-1967, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, published by Victor H. Green, informed African Americans how to travel through the United States safely. This guide also included hotels and motels that were safe for African Americans. The Magnolia Hotel was listed in the *Green Book* from 1955-1957, and from 1959-1961 it was given a "star rating," indicating it was premier lodging in the area. (Fig. 10) Because the Chitlin' Circuit ran through Greensboro and was the home to many music venues during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, the Magnolia hotel often catered to famous African American musicians traveling this Circuit, including Ray Charles, Gladys Knight, and Louis Armstrong, among others.

During this time, the Magnolia Hotel also served the African American community as a meeting space for local community activism. Piedmont Natural Gas and the World War I Veterans of Guilford County used the Magnolia Hotel as a meeting space as did political activism groups, including the Guilford County Negro Democratic Club, attendees of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and sit-in training for CORE. Through its engagement with the community and social activist groups, the Magnolia Hotel fostered community within Greensboro.

After the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Magnolia House began to lose business, and eventually, the Gist family transformed the hotel into a boarding house. The hotel officially closed in the 1980s and it eventually fell into disrepair. Samuel Pass then bought the house in 1996. Along with his daughter, Natalie Pass-Miller, Samuel Pass began restoring the home to highlight the house's connection with African American history in the community.



Fig. 11: Every week, the Historic Magnolia hosts a Sunday Jazz Brunch for the community to attend.

The historic Magnolia House offers many programs that serve the community, displaying the successful use of community and communication practices presented by Vagnone and Ryan. According to Melissa Knapp, the Historic Site Manager and Curator, these programs include educational and arts programs. These Programs include free Table Talk educational programs focusing on black history and the *Green Book* and a shoebox meal program based on black culinary history and Green Book Travel. They also offer an art program focusing on music education, giving opportunities to young high school and college-aged Jazz musicians to gain exposure, playing Experience, and mentorship in a professional setting at their Sunday Jazz Brunch. (Fig. 11) Through these programs and services, the Historic Magnolia house revitalizes and honors the history of the home by sharing the critical role the house played in civil rights history and honoring the original operations of the house through their Sunday Jazz Brunch.

Addressing the role the house plays as a community space, Melissa states, "Because of the history of the house, we're known in this community as a black sanctuary and a hub of black history. As a result, this space is significant to members of the local community, and I think most of the traffic and donations to our site result from this. Going forward and as we expand, we are interested in figuring out how we can continue to serve our community best and provide needed services." Because of this history and the significant memories held by this house and members of the community, Knapp feels they see significant enthusiasm and support. By addressing the importance of community members' experiences with the house and community, the Historic Magnolia house displays the importance of the theme of Experience, as presented by Vagnone and Ryan.

The Historic Magnolia House is also making efforts to display the narrative of the house and its history for

visitors. In the Fall of 2020, students from UNC Greensboro's Museum Studies Master's Program created panels discussing the history of the house, which are displayed within the house. The panels cover the early history of the house, the Magnolia Hotel, the house's role in community activism, its connections to the Chitlin' Circuit as it provided housing for famous black musicians, the *Green Book*, and the recent restoration and revitalization efforts by Samuel Pass.

Conclusion

Historic houses are important. They allow us to tell the stories of our history and the important people within a community, but sometimes the best way to tell those stories is not to create a house museum. Creating a space that serves a community is a way to continue the legacy of a historic house while adding to the history. The work done by CHSWV out of Jan's House allows for the structure to, once again, serve a purpose by addressing community needs and providing a haven for those in need. The Historic Magnolia House serves the community as it once had, as a black sanctuary and black history hub. Rather than turning historic homes into museums, it should be our goal to create spaces that address community needs while honoring and recognizing history. A historic house does not have to be a museum to tell its story.

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