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Online Interpretation Guideline for Historic House Museums

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State University of New York
College at Buffalo
Department of History

Online Interpretation Guideline for Historic House Museums

An Abstract of a Thesis in
Museum Studies

By
Olivia Anne Weixlmann

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts
December 2020

Abstract

What does it mean to be a museum in 2020? How do cultural institutions, charged with preserving our history, navigate the challenges of the modern world? Technological advances including the internet, quickly produce an abundance of media outlets baiting attention that impact the sociopolitical climate driving civil unrest, and ideological division. The surplus of competing information from technology driven outlets result in audiences being overwhelmed and left questioning if the information they're receiving is from a reliable source.

Traditionally, museums and historic house museums have been trustworthy institutions to which the public looks for thoughtful and honest information. However, technology has influenced audiences' expectations of historic sites and how house museums connect with audiences demonstrating their significance and relevance in the twenty-first century. Technology, particularly websites, is an asset in the museum industry that not all museum professionals fully utilize as a promotional platform to provide accessible educational content. But with daily operational challenges, there is little time to update a house museum's digital content. This thesis is designed to make the addition of digital content and online interpretation easier through a guideline. It aims to examine why it is essential in the twenty-first century to have a solid online presence and how current house museums use their institution's website to connect with modern audiences while balancing their audience's evolving expectations for inclusive narratives, current sociopolitical movements, and the international health crisis.

State University of New York College at Buffalo

Department of History

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By
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of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
December 2020

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	i
THESIS COMMITTEE SIGNATORY.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
CHAPTER 1:	
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2:	
Literature Review.....	4
CHAPTER 3:	
Guideline motivation and organization.....	40
CHAPTER 4:	
Historic House Museum Case Studies.....	47
Historic House Museum Virtual Tours.....	49
Historic House Museum Online Content.....	56
CHAPTER 5:	
Conclusion.....	69
ADDENDUM.....	71
REFERENCES.....	73

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: National Awareness, Attitude, and Usage study update 2019 bar chart, by IMPACTS Research and Development company. Image downloaded from <https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/> in September 2020.

Figure 2: National Awareness, Attitude, and Usage study update 2019 bar chart, by IMPACTS Research and Development company. Image downloaded from <https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/> in September 2020.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This thesis will examine how house museum staff have reinvented their institutions to connect and attract their target audiences in the rapidly changing twenty-first century. Current shifts in societal attitudes are catalyzed, in part, by technology and the increasing reliance on digital devices to fulfill expectations. The integration of technology into daily life implores history workers to capitalize on technology's many products and digital platforms to advance their historic site's content, as well as existing methods developed to reach their surrounding communities.

However, several works examined in this paper have made it evident that generations of museum professionals have striven to continue historic house museums' relevance with the public. These published books and articles indicate static elements in need of revitalization. Features such as narrative interpretation and tours have been the topic of much scrutiny and reinvention by museum professionals to modernize historical sites, including Sherry Butcher-Young and Sandra M. Lloyd. Not without solutions for their criticisms, many authors communicated their suggestions through guidelines. These guidelines are a structured list intended to aid history workers to readjust, evaluate, or otherwise improve their historic sites to fit visitor needs better.

Like so many of the chosen works in the literature review, this thesis will cover a museum feature, the historic house museum website, that is arguably often overlooked or underdeveloped by museum professionals as an essential feature. When prioritized, a museum's website can secure a historic house museum's significance with audiences in a technology dependent society.

During this paper's writing, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has completely altered daily life across the globe: straining resources, pushing companies to adapt quickly to stay afloat, restricting social gatherings, and negatively affecting many industries, including the museum industry. One could not imagine that a health crisis such as COVID-19 would be the motivation history workers need to invest in their historic site's digital content. Sadly, due to the unique qualities of COVID-19, physical connectivity and socialization between individuals has been restricted to preserve our health. Global pandemics have been linked to mass social changes and cultural upheavals. In the case of this health crisis, COVID-19 has accelerated movements related to race, including the Black Lives Matter protests, as well as gender and equality movements, and has exposed deep-seated polarization in the country's political alignments, all during an intense American presidential election year.

Fortunately, despite being negatively affected by the pandemic, house museums are now able to remedy the loss of person-to-person connectivity and contextualize current events through their websites and digital content. However, to know how to utilize a historic site's website entirely is, like most projects, time-consuming. It may be difficult for history workers, who, before the 2020 pandemic, were overwhelmed by other challenges.

Therefore, this thesis aims to reduce the time and effort needed by history workers to put forth digital content that will testify to their historic site's continued importance in modern society. Comparative to other museum professionals' writings, the steps to achieve this goal are represented by a guideline using four historic house museums as examples: James Madison's Montpelier, Jane Addams Hull-House

Museum, Gracie Mansion, and The Alice Austen House. These sites demonstrate how to face the challenges of a historic house museum successfully, expand its capabilities, and accomplish the museum goals.

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the staff at these house museums adapted quickly by opening digital doors to online visitors with virtual tours while their physical doors remained closed. Additionally, they combine aspects of the current sociopolitical environment with the house museum's purpose and storyline, which is reflected in exhibits and other digital content developed by staff.

While I intend to provide history workers with an additional resource to help them develop their house museum's website to connect with twenty-first century audiences, online platforms, and, more specifically, the internet: the guideline is only in its infancy. I hope that as resources grow for house museums to use for the betterment of their historical sites, so too, will this guideline expand and improve.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care, Preservation, & Management

This handbook was written in 1993 by Sherry Butcher-Youngmans, a “Historian working in the areas of public history and historic preservation.”¹ The need for this book came from two surveys on historic houses by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and an “independent survey of historic house museums in the United States”² that delivered less than satisfying results of basic historic house needs. Ranging from staff, budgets, building upkeep to community engagement historic houses across the country were underfunded, understaffed and mismanaged.³ In response, Butcher-Youngmans wrote *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care, Preservation, & Management* that gives “practical, inexpensive, and easy-to accomplish solutions to increase the professionalism of these museums.”⁴ It is intended to be used by history workers, whether they be paid staff or community minded volunteers.

While Butcher-Youngmans covers a variety of topics ranging from collections, preservation, funding, storage and security, chapter 10 is of most interest and relevance to this thesis, as it deals with the topic of interpretation. Unlike works about

¹ Sherry Butcher-Youngmans, *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care, Preservation, & Management* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

interpretation that were published in more recent years, the author is focused on the physical structure of historic houses and a broader definition of interpretation. She states that interpretation is “the structure in which information about the historic house is presented, in an attempt to stimulate the senses and arouse the imagination.”⁵ When and how and by what means interpretation takes place is based, in part, by how a historic house is categorized. Although Butcher-Youngmans realizes each historic house is unique and there can be combinations of historic house types, the three staples of historic house interpretations are identified as

- The Documentary: centered around an important or significant historical figure.⁶
- The Representative: centered around “a way of life rather than on a particular individual or family.”⁷ Or focused on a style of architecture or time period.
- The Aesthetic: where “the historic house serves as a backdrop for the objects, with no particular attention paid to former residents or the events that took place there.”⁸

Even though Butcher-Youngmans is more attentive towards the management and overall care of historic houses, she does understand the importance of interpretation, and the large part it plays in community engagement. This includes emphasizing historical accuracy and avoiding overly romanticizing historical figures. She recognizes the importance of being more inclusive when developing narratives, stating, “if possible,

⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁶ Ibid., 184.

⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁸ Ibid.

try to incorporate the personalities and views of servants, slaves, gardeners, handymen,”⁹ as a way to achieve a more comprehensive narrative.

Moreover, given the perspective of time, in comparison to more recent works devoted to interpretation, Butcher-Youngmans did not appear to communicate the necessity of including marginalized or otherized people into the narrative of historic houses, particularly people of color, who manifestly contributed to the wealth and success of many so-called ‘great men’ in mainstream history. On the other hand, the chapter on interpretation voices the importance of not only creating opportunities for audiences to learn more about historic houses outside traditional tours; but to provide them with tools and sources to explore it, such as lectures, workshops, books and conferences. Lastly, Butcher-Youngmans scarcely mentions a historic house's website as a source for interpretation. Nor does she consider any digital media as a tool for history workers to increase their community engagement as it did not exist as a communication tool yet (in 1993).

Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites

This relevant book was written by Julia Rose, currently the director of the West Baton Rouge Museum and chairman for the Council for the American Association for State and Local History in 2016.¹⁰ Like that of Butcher-Youngmans', her book is dedicated to history workers; but is primarily focused on workers “who are charged with

⁹ Ibid., 211.

¹⁰ Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 238.

interpreting difficult histories.”¹¹ Rose has developed an educational tool called Commemorative Museum Pedagogy, or CMP. As an educational method created to assist history workers it approaches the subject of:

interpreting difficult histories that takes into account the learners’ responses to the difficult histories and that allows for history workers to sensitively develop historical representations of the oppressed, victimized, and subjugated individuals and groups.¹²

In comparison to the previous work, Rose’s book is primarily focused on the audience and history workers, the connections they make to otherized people at historic houses, and how to meet their needs when interacting with difficult histories. In this instance, difficult histories are defined as “histories of oppression, violence, and trauma.”¹³ The catalyst for *Interpreting Difficult Histories at Museums and Historic Sites* came from her experience as a part of the interpretive staff at a southern plantation historic house. Rose developed CMP to assist interpretive staff who may be unsure of including difficult histories into the narrative of historic houses. CMP was formalized during a 2005 action research study at Magnolia Mound Plantation.¹⁴ Rose challenged staff to expand their inclusion and interpretation of slavery (a difficult history) into the narrative of the plantation.¹⁵

The CMP method can be broken down into two parts. The first, known as the 5Rs, are the many phases of emotions and thoughts learners may experience while processing difficult history:

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 189.

¹⁵ Ibid., 192.

- Reception: The visitor shows a willingness to learn and a desire to engage with the presented interpretation.¹⁶
- Resistance: The visitor repressed new information, often an interpretation of history that challenges their preconceived knowledge, and outwardly expresses their rejection of this new knowledge.¹⁷
- Repetition: Based on a Freudian concept that audiences use repetition as a tool for mourning and testing reality. By repeatedly asking questions about the difficult history, the visitor tries to process presented information.¹⁸
- Reflection: How visitors reflect and find meaning in difficult history and how history workers can observe these reflections through visitors' conversations or their moments of silence.¹⁹
- Reconsideration: Occurs after visitors have moved through emotions of shock. Reconsideration is not closure but an opening for audiences to experience empathy and want to respond, and care about the presented history.²⁰

Rose explains that when history workers recognize these reactions in their audience, whether internally or externally expressed, they are able to “sharpen their observation skills in order to support learners and to be more sensitive to the enormous

¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

²⁰ Ibid., 124.

variety of learners.”²¹ Part two focuses on what history workers can do to assist learners through the process when faced with difficult history. The building blocks of CMP also give history workers tools they can implement when interpreting difficult history for audiences. They are referred to as:

- The Face: Encouraging learners to connect with otherized people. Based on philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy of the ‘face-to-face encounter’ which gives the visitor the responsibility to acknowledge the other by understanding their personhood by knowing and understanding their human experience.²²
- The Real: Physical object, such as photographs or journals used in the “validation for the history being recalled.”²³
- The Narrative: How “the experiences of the historical Others were the results of ideologies and organized actions in a historical context.”²⁴

In short, the Narrative is used to help develop the Face, while the Real is reliant on the objects that are used as tools to develop a learner’s connection to the personhood of historical Others, being “a person or group who is a marginalized or excluded subject from a difficult history.”²⁵

As a way to assist audiences through their resistance, Rose used historic houses and museums that are based around difficult histories, including the United States

²¹ Ibid., 111.

²² Ibid., 136.

²³ Ibid., 142.

²⁴ Ibid., 153.

²⁵ Ibid., 133.

Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Whitney Plantation in Gramercy, Louisiana. They expressed how staff designed specific places to give audiences physical spaces where they could rest and reflect on the information they had absorbed, describing them as quiet places of reflection or sanctuaries. However, in *Interpreting Difficult Histories at Museums and Historic Sites*, little attention is given to the possibility of using online interpretation as a tool to help audiences through the resistance process beyond the onsite experience. Becoming a place of reflection and using online interpretation as a primary tool to interpret difficult histories, are ways to remain relevant when experiencing contemporary political tensions.

Similar to Butcher-Youngmans, Rose recognizes that results vary depending on the willingness of staff to put in the time to make these changes. Rose also accounts for the many risks learners and history workers face when interpreting difficult history with controversy, feelings of guilt or shame, shock, and trauma being among them. But Rose stressed to readers that failure to do so would discount the increase in public demand for more inclusive history. She believed that “hopefulness and reconciliation”²⁶ are possible if difficult histories were integrated into historic houses.

National Park Service Foundation of Interpretation Curriculum Content Narrative

The National Park Service operates under the philosophy that “charges interpreters to help audiences *care* about park resources so they might support the care

²⁶ Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 78.

for park resources.”²⁷ This philosophy is reflected in the *Foundations of Interpretation Curriculum Content Narrative*, last updated in 2007 and the Service’s definition of interpretation.²⁸ Dissimilar to Butcher-Youngmans who believes that interpretation is given to audiences, the National Park Service places strong emphasis on the audience being helped to do it on their own, defining interpretation as a “catalyst in creating an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings and significance inherent in the resource.”²⁹

As was promoted by Rose and the development of CMP, the National Park Service developed tools for interpreters to help audiences create intangible-tangible connections with historic sites. The system in which $(KR+KA) AT = IO$ is “an interpreter’s Knowledge of the Resource (KR), combined with their Knowledge of the Audience (KA), can be shared through an Appropriate Technique (AT) to provide an Interpretive Opportunity (IO).”³⁰ The Interpretive Triangle and ART, are visual aids created to supply the same information of audience knowledge, resource knowledge and interpretive opportunity to interpreters to choose individually to understand how to become successful interpreters.

While all points are deemed important by the National Park Service, great emphasis is placed on understanding KA or Knowledge of Audiences, acknowledging how important it is to “understand and respect the reasons why visitors come to our places, and to meet them ‘where they are’ in their understanding of the value of the

²⁷ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” National Park Services U.S. Department of the Interior, 2007, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/101/FoundationsCurriculum.pdf>

²⁸ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

²⁹ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

³⁰ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

resource.”³¹ Like *Interpreting Difficult Histories for Museums and Historic Sites*, meeting audiences “where they are”³² may be recognition by the National Park Service, that not all audiences are eager to learn about all topics of history. Audiences may be hesitant, uninformed, or even resistant to information they receive from interpreters at historical sites. Therefore, it is the duty of interpreters to guide audiences through their resistance, as stressed by Rose, and “produce a tangible-intangible link in the mind of the audience member.”³³ The National Park Service notes that if visitors come to historic sites, then they believe they are important and hold value. If they do not believe they are important; then it is unlikely they will visit. Therefore, in order to form these tangible-intangible connections, historic sites should be interpreted through concepts that audiences consider important. The Harry Truman House successfully demonstrates this concept by interpreting the historic house as a place of a U.S. President, while including narratives of social equality and democracy.³⁴

However, the National Park Service saw interpreters refer to the interpretation tool to “provide orientation, information and inspiration in the right amounts and at the right times”³⁵ for audiences to develop connection with historic sites. Rose offered CMP as a tool for interpretation staff to help audiences through the resistance process and connect with the people that are the subject of difficult history. Furthermore, the possibility of online interpretation for encouraging tangible-intangible connection with historic sites is not included in the *Foundations of Interpretation Curriculum Content*

³¹ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

³² “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

³³ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

³⁴ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

³⁵ “Foundations of Interpretation curriculum Content Narrative,” accessed June, 12, 2020.

Narrative. Access to the digital world and the informative opportunities it can provide are increasing. The museum field and its related organizations, such as the National Park Services, should utilize the digital platform by incorporating online interpretation in addition to in-person techniques to achieve the maximum "interpretive opportunity". This platform can conjointly allow the National Park Service to address contemporary social or political issues, relative to historic sites in a timely manner. Importantly, the NPS must remain neutral and apolitical in interpretation methods because of it being a governmental entity.

Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions

This instructive book was published in 2019 and edited by Kenneth C. Turino and Max van Balgooy. Kenneth C. Turino is a "manager of community partnership and resource development at Historic New England"³⁶ and an instructor of AASLH's Reinventing the Historic House workshop. Max A. van Balgooy is the "president of Engaging Places, a design and strategy firm that connects people and historic places."³⁷ as well as an assistant professor for the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University.³⁸ As this book is part of a series created by The American Association for State and Local History or AASLH, it aims to address "issues critical to

³⁶ Kenneth Turino and Max van Balgooy, eds., *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 339.

³⁷ Ibid., 399.

³⁸ Ibid.

the field of state and local history through interpretive, intellectual, scholarly, and educational texts.”³⁹

Turino and van Balgooy created *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, inspired by the “one-day workshop, Reinventing the Historic House Museum,”⁴⁰ a conference that discussed how to keep the struggling museum industry afloat, particularly house museums, when they appear to be stuck in traditional museum practices that are no longer effective. This book is a combination of a “museum conference, a hands-on workshop, and tool-box.”⁴¹ Giving insight about the possible solutions to history workers unable to attend the conference, the book is broken down into five parts:

1. Fundamentals and Essentials: This part “identifies the basic building blocks that provide a stable foundation for the success and provides advice on what museum should know, do, or have ready to begin to reimagine themselves.”⁴²
2. Audiences: Focus “discusses some major audiences for house museums as well as general advice on engagement.”⁴³
3. Different Approaches to Familiar Topics: Looks to examine topics related to interpretation of people and the importance of diversity.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

4. Methods: Offers “practices that can reinvigorate house museums and considers how the most popular methods of interpreting house museums can be reimagined,”⁴⁵ mainly tours and school programming.
5. Imaging New Kinds of House Museums: Discusses an article by Elizabeth Merritt about the possible future of historic houses and other museum field professionals’ perspectives on their proposed futures.⁴⁶

Each part is made up of several chapters, written by various authors with their own museum field experiences and expertise, including Turino and van Balgooy. While individual chapters for each part are unique and provide important information, there are similar themes that are threaded throughout the book. Similar to Rose's book, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, it focuses on visitor experience and fulfilling the public's desire for diversity in interpretation and inclusive narratives in which contemporary audiences can relate. Rose, Turino, and van Balgooy encourage reflection from museum staff on how they *should* reevaluate how house museums understand their relationship with audiences, and their value to the community.

The distinction between these two works is as follows: Rose is primarily focused on how interpretative staff can guide audiences through more diverse topics and narratives, specifically, difficult histories. On the other hand, Turino and van Balgooy not only encourage museum workers to evaluate their interpretive programs; but reorganize and examine the entirety of how a historic house operates.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The necessity of evaluating one's house museum is stressed throughout the book, with successful examples of museum transformations, like that of the Molly Brown House Museum in Denver, Colorado. This historic site capitalized on the 1997 *Titanic* film, including pop culture events in the site's interpretation to attract audiences.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the editors point out that:

evaluation is not just a process; it is a way of thinking about everything that you do. Historic House museums that make evaluative thinking a priority will provide evidence to their community, their existence is making a difference in peoples' lives.⁴⁸

Their theory is best represented by house museums that put audiences first, while staying true to their missions. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center is a successful example of this theory. During the 2000s, the Center, like many house museums was an "introverted, invisible, and unknown organization."⁴⁹ It was not until the Center's staff had "rethought itself and transformed into a new kind of historic house museum"⁵⁰ that they were able to fully benefit their community. A key contribution to their success was the focus on audiences, knowing what visitors wanted out of the site, and how the staff could achieve their wishes. In short, audiences wanted to be engaged with the Center and Stowe's story, and be a part of the conversation, instead of being lectured to.

In response to these needs, the Center created salons as a "safe place to talk about difficult topics, a place where we bring people together to talk across racial, class,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

and ethnic lines.”⁵¹ Fortunately, despite the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center continues to fulfill their mission that “promotes vibrant discussion of her life and work, and inspires commitment to social justice and positive change.”⁵²

Staff have been challenged to develop clever solutions to the health and safety requirements made by government leaders and healthcare authorities. To prevent contagion, visitors are unable to interact with each other or freely walk about, as social distancing is encouraged. The Harriet Beecher Stowe staff have turned to the internet to combat this challenge, continuing to reach their audiences. While it is not permissible to hold salons at the Center, open discussions of social justice continue through the use of their website. ‘Stowe in Place,’ a virtual discussion with Albert Woodfox and his memoir *Solitary*, is now being held as a two-part conversation with the author and staff moderators. Audiences can virtually engage with Woodfox and other participants. This maintains the spirit and goal of the Center’s mission to promote social justice conversations, while keeping to social distancing requirements.⁵³

Additionally, other house museums named in this book have found success after they had expanded their interpretation beyond mainstream historical narratives. Examples include the Betsy Ross House, that “provides a richer and more compelling story of Ross during the American Revolution and independence,”⁵⁴ by interpreting history through a woman’s perspective. Another example is the LGBTQ social hour at

⁵¹ Ibid., 149.

⁵² Ibid., 144.

⁵³ “Stowe Prize in Place 2020-Register Today,” Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, The Hartford, accessed August 14, 2020. <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/sp2020/>.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 230.

the website of Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House in Gloucester, Massachusetts that “heralds the start of interpretation related to its owner’s homosexuality.”⁵⁵ The Montclair Historical Society, which after a four-month closing in 2014, “told a more inclusive story of the house’s history [about] Israel Crane, his family, the enslaved workers, domesticated servants, boarders who lived at the YWCA.”⁵⁶ These are the people before the museum’s closure, who were excluded from the house museum’s narrative; and therefore, weakened the relationship between the Black community in Montclair, New Jersey and the House museum.

Having been hard hit by the COVID-19 health crisis, these sites have adapted similar methods to engage with their audience, through use of online interpretation such as developing videos of historical re-enactors who discuss popular tour topics.⁵⁷ Sites have also continued their programming through video links, like *Zoom* and historical blogs for audiences to learn and experience the historic site while at home.⁵⁸

In addition to having their own unique reimaging experience, Turino and van Balgooy identified several factors that make for a successful house museum. These factors are:

1. Mission and Vision: A historic house mission and vision should be focused, clear and embody the uniqueness of a historic house.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁷ “Official Betsy Ross house- Tours, Tickets & Programs,” Historic Philadelphia, accessed August 14, 2020, <http://historicphiladelphia.org/betsy-ross-house/betsy-at-home-2/>.

⁵⁸ “Home” Montclair History Center, Accessed August 4, 2020. <https://www.montclairhistory.org/home>.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 102.

2. Leadership: Strong leaderships derive from a museum director and board. Successful house museums have a strong, positive relationship between director and board.⁶⁰
3. Clear Organizational Structure: Successful house museums “have an organizational structure that is good match for the site, enables healthy partnering, and value to the site’s mission.”⁶¹
4. Internet and Digital Technology: “The internet levels the playing field for the small museum, allowing it to present a profile online that is as aggressive and dynamic as that of a larger institution.”⁶²
5. Creativity and the Arts of Adaptation: Successful historic houses “look for innovative solutions to adapt to a changing environment and to overcome difficulties.”⁶³
6. Evaluation: Successful house museums have a “willingness to try and even fail at new programs and ventures [that] must engage in self-examination”⁶⁴ to determine what works and what doesn’t.
7. Collaboration and Collegiality: Although there is some competition between museums, “collaboration is usually good for all participants, whether they compete or not.” Collaborating can be achieved through community engagement programs and marketing.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁶¹ Ibid., 108.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 109.

While all factors are of importance, Internet and Digital Technology are of the most interest for the purpose of this thesis. Turino and van Balgooy advocate caution pertaining to technology. Their reasoning is that with:

technological advances changing at such a quick rate, museums with limited budgets and small staff need to exercise caution when choosing a format appropriate for its limited resources. It is often best to stick to traditional formats that have proven themselves over time, rather than to invest in the latest fad that may be too expensive or may not stand the test of time.⁶⁶

Although I cannot disagree that technology can be temperamental, and museum workers should do their due diligence with social media and the internet, I wholly advocate that staff should evaluate and develop their websites; as the successful house museums in this book have done with their programming. Although knowing that the cost of technology upgrades to both big and small house museums can be expensive, I believe it will prove to be a worthwhile investment. I agree with the editors, that the internet and digital platforms “promote the museum’s messaging, [and] internet technologies are inexpensive ways to present local history, highlight collections, advertise events, and reach new audiences.”⁶⁷ The idea of having collections highlighted and promoting a mission through digital means can be taken further by presenting in-depth interpretation of exhibits into a house museum’s online site.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 108.

As previously stated, *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* is part “workshop and tool-box.”⁶⁸ As such, Turino and van Balgooy provide a journey map for museum workers to imagine their audience’s experience; not from when they begin their tour, but by beginning at home while exploring a house museum’s website. Turino and van Balgooy write that the visitor experience is a combination of the website, driving, parking, buying tickets, touring, shopping and returning home.⁶⁹

However, due to a variety of reasons, some visitor experiences may start and end at home; an opportunity to deliver online visitors a full, explorative experience is being missed. Museum workers should invest in their house museum’s website, and more importantly, their interpretative materials, by means of their virtual tours and online exhibits. House museums can connect with audiences and allow those audiences to relate to the museum’s narratives and messaging in their own time.

Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences

This book, like many sources throughout this literature review, is a part of the American Alliance of State and Local Houses (AASLH) series. In this instance, *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* was written by Cherstin M. Lyon, Elizabeth M. Nix and Rebecca K. Shrum.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

Lyon, Nix and Shrum all received their Ph.D. in either History or American Studies. Found in the authors' dedicated page, Lyon, "regularly works with students and community partners to research immigrant histories, historic preservation, and public outreach;"⁷⁰ similarly, Shrum works with students studying public history. Nix has participated in the multi-award-winning Baltimore '68 committee, a public history project that will be discussed in greater detail further in this literature review.⁷¹

Unlike previous works in this series, such as *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, this book is targeted towards teachers, professors, and their students. Rooted in the philosophy that follows National Council on Public History (NCPH) 'Best Practices' to introduce higher education students to public history;⁷² thus, illustrating the authors' purpose to:

provide history educators with a foundational text [...], that will aid in assessment of student learning, and that can support more in-depth examinations of the questions that drive a variety of public history projects and venues.⁷³

The chapters are broken down based on public historians and the "questions and ethical dilemmas"⁷⁴ that occur throughout their careers, revealing potential issues and showing "theories and basic conceptual building blocks intermixed with cases studies."⁷⁵ Through this structure the authors are able to prepare students more effectively for a

⁷⁰ Cherstin M. Lyon, Elizabeth M. Nix, and Rebecca K. Shrum. *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 187.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., XI.

⁷³ Ibid., IX.

⁷⁴ Ibid., X.

⁷⁵ Ibid., XI.

career in public history, and introduce them to the versatility of a history or public history degree.

Early sections of this book are dedicated to illustrating the core skills, abilities and knowledge used in a public historian's daily experiences including how to conduct research, write engaging labels, and articulate key concepts that distinguish public history and historians from other academic fields. Students will learn the necessity of thinking critically, analytically, and historically. It is not until later in the book that the authors explore the subject of public historians and how they interact with the public and develop programs by using the Baltimore '68 case study.

Jessica Elfenbein, a history professor at Baltimore University, developed this case study in 2008 with a steering committee, Rebecca Shrum, and Baltimore residents. The Baltimore '68 project refers to the 1968 Baltimore riots that occurred after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr.⁷⁶

As the 40th anniversary of the event approached, Professor Elfenbein wanted to “break the silence in an effort to remove a stumbling block to future civic progress.”⁷⁷ Continually, the project became more relevant years later, as Baltimore again rioted after the death of Freddie Gray, a young black man, who died in police custody in 2015.⁷⁸

While detailing the progression of such a project, readers discover the importance of audience participation and oral history. They learn how to collect oral

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

history and gain the realization that oral history is shared history; meaning, the gathered public oral history, can be an equal authority to the narrative created by public historians. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the concept that even though certain historical events are not written about in-depth by academia, does not mean that they are unimportant. There are ways to find and preserve community history, with little documentation. One way is oral history.

This leads to an over-arching theme that is present in several other literature review sources that address diversity and the importance of inclusive historical representation from the museum and public history field. In sources such as *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*, and *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, the preservation and presentation of women, people of color, and other minority peoples are essential. Including a better representation of voices not only expands and tells historical narratives more accurately; but it builds (and often rebuilds) strong community relationships, in which public history/historians are based. In this book, the importance of including diversity is demonstrated through these case studies.

The Manzanar National Historic Site is a United States Japanese internment camp from War II that became a National Park Service protected site in 1992.⁷⁹ Since then “efforts to preserve and interpret Manzanar’s history and to establish NPS stewardship over the site involved strong public support, particularly from Japanese Americans.”⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the site had been demolished and left abandoned for years

⁷⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 148.

and little physical evidence remains. In this case study the authors emphasize the “innovative strategies”⁸¹ to preserve the public memory of this site, for not only those who were wrongly imprisoned; but for public engagement, such as the annual pilgrimage to the site conducted by students, activists, and former Japanese-Americans who were imprisoned at the camps. This was done to preserve public memory of this part in history, hoping that similar events do not happen again.⁸²

The exhibition, *Voices of Lombard Street: A Century of Change in East Baltimore*, explores the simple question ‘What happened to Lombard Street?’ after the 1968 riots that occurred after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s death.⁸³ When exploring this question, an exhibit organizer from the Jewish Museum of Maryland found that “East Lombard had been central to Baltimore’s Jewish community during most of the twentieth century.”⁸⁴ However, today that street is mostly empty lots with one lonely deli remaining. While it can be first assumed that the businesses were destroyed during the riots, “historian Deborah Weiner pulled together primary documents photographs, oral histories, and newspaper clippings”⁸⁵ that suggested otherwise. Being innovative, the exhibition reveals the truth as to ‘what happened to Lombard Street?’ in a straightforward manner. Many of the shops were run by Jewish families raising money for their children to attend college. Once that goal was accomplished, those children, now adults, did not want to run the businesses; their families closed shops and retired.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 148.

⁸³ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

In these case studies, the museum staff needed to be innovative and creative. As determined by this book, sites and buildings can tell the previously repressed stories of class inequities, such as “Mansions associated with the rich and powerful stand for centuries, while sweatshops and tenements associated with the laboring classes are demolished for new development.”⁸⁶ Historic sites connected to women and minorities, were seen as unimportant to history and until recently have all but disappeared. However, that does not mean they are completely lost. As stated by Lyon, Nix, and Shrum, “communities and families are the keepers of their own stories.”⁸⁷ The marginalized people, whose stories are exceptionally relevant today, only need to be collected, formalized and presented. Many times, the experiences of marginalized people cannot be traditionally presented in a historic house museum or historic site because those buildings are often destroyed or unrecognizable. They can be exhibited and engage audiences inside and outside their communities through online exhibitions, either independently or at other history museums.

Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums

This impactful book is an essential part of my literature review because is it referenced in other books on historic house museums, including *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic sites*, *Reimagining House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* and *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*. Published in 2016, this book is the result of two passionate “museum lovers

⁸⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

and professionals:⁸⁸ Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan. Vagnone “serves on numerous nonprofit boards; such as the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, the Greater Hudson Heritage Network, and the Advisory Board for the national organization, Partners for Sacred Places.”⁸⁹ Ryan is a “practicing landscape architect and an Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of North Carolina Charlotte.”⁹⁰

The authors wrote *Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums* because they believe house museums “fail, at least in part, by their inability to draw connections between the real-life, quirky, and emotional experiences from the House’s past and the same sorts of feelings in the visitor’s own homes.”⁹¹ This statement is a continuing theme found in many previously discussed sources. The museum field, particularly house museums, lack the ability to engage with audiences and form meaningful relationships with their communities. Instead, the field sticks to traditional museum practices, and does not adapt to the needs of modern audiences. In the eyes of Vagnone and Ryan, history workers are unable to demonstrate their house museums’ value and relevance serving as institutions for historical context and education to the public. Thus, “they are increasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the demographic and technological changes around them.”⁹² Likewise, the authors argue that house museums are quickly turned from “being woolly, sloppy and impressionistic to being places that are systematic, objective, and professional. In

⁸⁸ Franklin D. Vagnone, Deborah E. Ryan, and Olivia B. Cothren. *Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016) 38.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 35.

⁹² Ibid., 39.

the process, the poetry of the Historic House Museums (HHM) is often lost in translation.”⁹³ Vagnone and Ryan’s book is intended to restore this poetry by aiding history workers in forming a balance between the organic and messiness of a home and the academic, multi-disciplinary relevance of a historic house.

Throughout each chapter, Vagnone and Ryan identify what they believe are long standing issues for the field. These issues vary from perpetuating notions that house museums are only interested in presenting a white, male, hetero-normative narrative. According to this source, the authors’ research has discovered that out of the “86,000 nationally designated historic sites, only 3 percent explicitly represent minority populations defined by race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.”⁹⁴

However, the examples used by Vagnone and Ryan suggest that not all house museums are keeping to the status quo. For instance, the Wren’s Nest House Museum, the home of Joel Chandler Harris, presented an unproblematic, white narrative of the controversial author, and had a “longstanding practice of not allowing blacks to visit.”⁹⁵ It was not until the director of the house museum, Lain Shakespeare announced “we’re letting people know the full story, instead of the story that’s been told by other people. We talk about it. We don’t sweep it under the rug.”⁹⁶ She was referring to Harris’s controversial history as the author of the Uncle Remus stories and his profit from traditional African American storytelling. However, the historic house museum headed in a new direction to discuss the “legacy of Joel Chandler Harris AND the heritage of

⁹³ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

African American folklore, thus the becoming an educational resource for the city of Atlanta.⁹⁷ Vagnone and Ryan offer methods for other house museums to change docent tours, loosen restrictions on public access, and increase interactive activities.

Another example is the Zimmerman House at the Conner Prairie in Indiana.⁹⁸ Discussed in *Introductions to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*, this historic house museum explores the role-playing activity surrounding the complex history of abolitionism and freedom-seeking slaves, with *Follow the North Star*.⁹⁹ In this source, the Zimmerman House invites visitors “to sign up for an overnight opportunity and live a 19th century farm lifestyle for 24 hours, complete with chores, cooking, early bedtime, parlor games.”¹⁰⁰ This is a perfect example to invoke the authors’ argument that “guests want to *physically experience* the history of the House, not just hear about it.”¹⁰¹

The majority of *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* is dedicated to changing community demographics and public interest. In turn, the authors advise history workers and hope that by reading this book, it “cultivates a culture of experimentation and speculation.”¹⁰² However, similar to previously discussed sources, this book deals with issues of connectivity and poor relationships that house museums have with their communities. It encourages history workers to find creative solutions for their institutions and invigorate their programming, tours and missions.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁹ Cherstin M. Lyon, Elizabeth M Nix, and Rebecca K. Shrum. *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Franklin D. Vagnone, Deborah E. Ryan, and Olivia B. Cothren. *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 114.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰² Ibid., 26.

The importance of enacting these changes cannot be understated, but I believe this book overlooks the importance of audience connectivity, through current events, particularly, socio-political events that should be addressed through temporary displays and exhibits either in the historic site or by virtual means. In doing so, history workers can connect their house museum's history to the events of today in creative and innovative ways to remain relevant with audiences. Especially during this time of contemporary political tensions, house museums can serve their communities as educational places for historical context and understanding.

Interpreting Historic House Museums

Jessica Foy Donnelly edited this book of essays by numerous historic house museum professionals who voice differing perspectives on historic house interpretation, ranging from landscapes to disability access, evolving house museum tours, and expanding interpretation to be inclusive of gender and minority stories. Several authors including Debra A. Reid, Bradley C. Brooks, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd, and Barbara Abramoff Levy are of interest for this thesis because they stress the importance of developing and implementing interpretation plans, reflecting the focus of their essays.

Scholarly works, such as *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care, Preservation & Management* written by Sherry Butcher-Youngmans inspired *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, because it "provide[s] ideas and guidelines for conducting some of the fundamental research required of house museum

specialists.”¹⁰³ Both authors believe that history workers are capable of giving audiences more, particularly with interpretation.

Although this book is not intended to be a comprehensive source for historic house museum interpretation, Donnelly argues that house museums should be viewed as “whole places,”¹⁰⁴ benefitting from multiple perspectives that are not limited to a single narrative. The following essays Donnelly compiled below reflect this idea:

Patrick H. Butler III, Rex M. Ellis, and Debra A. Reid approach interpretation similarly, encouraging house museums to “keep up with the times.” Butler argues that by staying up-to-date with technologies, research methods advance and house museums can relay new historical research discoveries to audiences who demand more in-depth interpretation. This argument is further supported by Ellis, who theorizes that as technology advances, so too does access to information increase for potential visitors. Twenty-first-century audiences are more informed about history and require history workers to meet their growing expectations. Reid explores incorporating narratives of non-traditional interpretation topics in house museum narratives, such as the subject of women, as well as domestic gender roles.

Reid argues that with the growing popularity of women and gender studies, house museums must adapt to include female stories at the forefront of their interpretation. However, how and where to incorporate female stories may be difficult. To aid history workers, Reid advocates for the use of a ‘gender sensitivity’ study to

¹⁰³ Jessica F. Donnelly, ed., *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltraMira Press, 2002), 19.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

identify female stories that can be implemented in a house museum,¹⁰⁵ while conjointly promoting the male role in domestic settings, which she believes has been underdeveloped in the past unless it pertains to a male servant or spaces in the home's interior that connect to men's careers outside the home, such as the library, billiard room, or foyer.¹⁰⁶ For example, the National Park Service (NPS) found more sites than previously thought are able to include and focus on women's history after conducting this 'gender sensitive' self-assessment. Fort Ticonderoga, New York incorporated a "well-heeled female traveler visiting the site during the 1830s"¹⁰⁷ as one of the site's characters to inform visitors of the 19th-century female experience. Additionally, after conducting the study, staff at the David Davis Mansion used his friends, family, and colleagues to interpret his domestic presence at his Bloomington, Illinois home, as he was mostly absent during his time as a U.S. Supreme Court justice.¹⁰⁸

Catherine Howett, Valerie Coon McAllister, Nancy E. Villa Bryk, and Bradley C. Brooks perceive historic house museums similarly. They advocate using material culture of objects and the house as an essential aspect of interpretation. Connecting audiences to a historic house's objects and their significance can be difficult, particularly for disabled visitors. Coon McAllister encourages staff to open and make easier access to a historic house; not as another bureaucratic requirement to fulfill, but as an opportunity to infuse disability challenges into their missions and maintain the goal of being an educational institution to *all* audiences.¹⁰⁹ Howett argues that understanding

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

what and how the landscapes were going to be designed and used can partly reveal the owner's culture and values. The material culture used, such as photographs or landscape illustration plans, holds memories. Releasing those memories to audiences in a 'moment-in-time' creates a connection that gives visitors an "intimate glimpse"¹¹⁰ of the objects' owner. Among the most common objects that can connect audiences to a house museum is furniture.

Because of furniture's high level of use throughout history, Brooks offers a framework for developing a furnishing plan in conjunction with a house museum's interpretive plan. A furnishing plan can be broken down into three parts: curatorial, interpretive, and operational. None is more important than the other: these three parts influence the decision-making of each stage.

- The Curatorial component "emphasizes object,"¹¹¹ being the furnishings chosen by the curator to reflect the interpretive goals of the historic house museum.
- The Interpretive component "emphasizes the story,"¹¹² being the narrative history that workers want to present to audiences. This component and the stories staff wish to interpret are supported by the objects chosen.
- The Operational component bridges the wants of the curator and the interpretive goals together.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 155.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 147.

¹¹² Ibid., 147.

The practical, functional part of Brooks' furnishing plan answers how best to present and arrange the chosen furnishings to maximize the staff's interpretive message. History workers are also required to be knowledgeable of the object's history, anticipate audience interests and needs, and consider preservation care for the chosen furnishings.

When developing a furnishing plan, Brooks argues that it should be done at the same time or after the development of the house museum's overarching interpretation. In doing so, each decision made by staff compliments each plan, giving them purpose to achieve interpretive goals. An interdependent relationship is shown by the Cliveden House, in Philadelphia. After the country's bicentennial in 1976, staff conducted research on objects that shed light on the Cliveden House, and found more objects, including furnishings, can be utilized to represent the Cliveden family's significance in American history better.¹¹³

Sandra M. Lloyd and Margaret Piatt agree that a large part of historic house museum interpretation is development of strong, engaging tours. Piatt argues that tours, and more importantly tour guides, are the key to providing audiences positive experiences at house museums. Lloyd argues that memorable tours are the result of "hard work *and* hard history,"¹¹⁴ presenting complex history to audiences. Creating tours, particularly thematic tours, can be a daunting project. In response, using the Cliveden in Philadelphia as an example, Lloyd suggests four steps for the staff follow.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

1. Know your history and start conducting research on the site. The Cliveden site opened in 1976 with a patriotic narrative in response to the country's bicentennial, because the house was relevant in the Battle of Germantown in 1777 between Continental troops and British soldiers. After the excitement of the bicentennial wore off, staff needed to readjust to gain relevance with audiences. They formed a team of consultants whose research revealed the Cliveden and the Chew family story extended beyond the 18th century (also discussed by Brooks).¹¹⁵
2. Form key themes from the research indicating the site's uniqueness and continued need for preservation. Staff at the Cliveden determined that there were three themes to be explored:
 - i. Cliveden's architectural history as an 18th century house with 19th century additions, surviving in a 21st century city.
 - ii. Battle of Germantown, 1777. Cliveden house acted as a barricade for British soldiers when fired upon by Washington's troops.
 - iii. The Chew family's campaign to have the Cliveden site become a national monument during the colonial revival movement.¹¹⁶
3. Form the key themes to create a narrative storyline representing the interpretation goals of the historic site. Lloyd acknowledges this may be a difficult process and suggests history workers use this sentence to begin the process: 'The *name of site* tells the story of...'. For the Cliveden,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 215.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 218.

finding the “song the house best sings”¹¹⁷ was not simple. Similar with most historic sites, their value is impossible to sum up in a few sentences. Lloyd explained that this process took six months to determine what narrative fit Cliveden. Staff determined Cliveden’s narrative was of two themes: The Revolutionary Battle and the Chew family.¹¹⁸

4. The interpretive foundation for a site is its narrative storyline.¹¹⁹ Once the interpreted storyline is formed, it should be expressed through public programs, exhibits, and tours. Following in Colonial Williamsburg’s footsteps, staff developed a thematic tour with ‘perspective history,’ meaning “history that looks at particular events from the perspective, or point of view, of particular people at particular moments in time.”¹²⁰ Staff developed “Chews for a day,” a thematic tour targeted at schools, where students would be a Chew family member. With this method, staff found that visitors engaged with the given information and connected to the Cliveden story.

Lastly, Jamie Credle, Patricia L. Kahle, Meggett B. Lavin, and Barbara Abramoff Levy all approach the human side of interpretations, knowing that interpretation and internal charges are wasted if the staff are unwilling to accept these changes to their daily routine of operations. Lavin argues giving interpreter aids and training are “more effective to time and money,”¹²¹ presenting Dayton Hall in South Carolina as an

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 222.

¹²¹ Ibid., 251.

example to emulate. Dayton Hall's interpretation model utilizes an interpreter's tool kit that includes "self-study guidelines and educational materials."¹²² However, adapting to operational changes means historic sites must have the budget to do so. Kahle acknowledges that most historic sites struggle to stay afloat. By using the Shadow-on-the-Teche as a case study, she argues the key to successful historic sites is their education programming, and relying on volunteers and the site's surrounding community, particularly schools, as participants in the program developing process. Credle argues that creating programming goes beyond well written project reports or tour scripts. Creativity is key and allows for a connection between audiences and the site's narrative to develop.¹²³ That creative energy is then channeled into a comprehensive plan. Interpretive planning is further explored by Levy.

Levy provides history workers with an interpretive plan that can be divided into three parts: Pre-planning, Plan's Content, and Follow-up.

Pre-planning is reminiscent of authors Turino and van Balgooy, imploring staff to conduct a self-examination of all operations and departments of their historic house museums, referred to as "Self-Analysis"¹²⁴ by Levy. Further she encourages staff to increase their audience knowledge, by studying how they best learn. Evoking the spirit of Lloyd's essay, Levy states visitors remember information better with a "thematic structure" and repetition; referencing *Great Tours! Thematic Tours and Guide Training for Historic Sites*, a book they collaborated on.

¹²² Ibid., 252.

¹²³ Ibid., 264.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 56.

Plan's Content is the formation, organization, and integration of major interpretive themes. Categorized by Levy and primary and secondary tools, it is designed to work in a supportive partnership. Primary tools are "the principle means of interpretation,"¹²⁵ which refers to general tours and exhibits to present the overarching message of the site to audiences. Supported by secondary tools, that "enhance and enrich"¹²⁶ the site's narrative to audiences consists of specialty tours, exhibits, and take away products for visitors.

The Follow-up is the last step of Levy's interpretation plan. She presses the significance of this step because it forces staff to recognize that interpretation plans are a trial-and-error process. Staff at historic house museums must evaluate the changes made to determine which elements of their programs and tours are successful, and what need editing.

Reid, Brooks, Lloyd, and Levy all approach interpretive planning through different perspectives. However, despite the varying subject matter, the authors' interpretation plans follow a similar pattern. First, research and evaluate. Then develop themes and narratives; the expression of those themes articulated through tours, exhibits and educational programming. End with a review, determining what changes were successful and which were not. At the time of the *Interpreting Historic House Museums* publication, technology – specifically the internet was not considered the leading source of mass communication. Knowing how important technology is to our lives today, there

¹²⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

is a pressing need for an online interpretation guideline. The structure for how to develop such a guideline is provided by Reid, Brooks, Lloyd, and Levy.

CHAPTER 3: Guideline Motivation and Organization

Throughout this Literature Review three arguments have pushed forward, pointing to why an online interpretation guideline for historic house museums is needed.

First, historic house museums should use and embrace technologies through online interpretation to connect with audiences and their evolving expectations. Second, historic house museums can demonstrate relevance and historic importance to audiences by interpreting current events related to racial justice, gender equality, political events, congressional trials or investigations, and so on. Lastly, many of the authors in the Literature Review utilized guidelines or structured lists to easily and clearly present their suggestions aimed at helping history workers improve, organize, and maximize the success for their historic house museums. However, the topic of online interpretation and how to use the internet to a site's advantage is, in my observation, underdeveloped.

Why should history workers put valuable energy into online interpretation, and dedicate precious money in the development of a successful, user-friendly, intriguing, and informative website? Museum and house museum budgets are shrinking, roofs are leaking, docents have to be trained, and educational programs need to be developed. This means the dedication for a well-crafted online interpretation with digital exhibits and tours can be a luxury. However, Ionian University professors, Katerina Kabassi, Christos Karydis, and Athanasios Botonis advocate that “websites positively and significantly influence users’ intentions of revisiting and visiting of the museum

physically.”¹²⁷ Their conclusion is supported by their study of 30 websites of museums’ conservation labs, for amount of content, accessibility, usability and information to determine their ranking of success.

Websites helping to promote historic house museums, including the integration of relevant current events with online interpretation, give opportunities for history workers to connect to audiences. However, in this time of social tension and political tribalism, concerns can be raised for house museums becoming associated with societal division. Fearing comments on issues of racial justice, Women’s rights, international and national policies, congressional events, and other such topics in museum exhibits or tours are indications that museums may be perceived as a part of the ‘educated elites’ and ‘liberal bias media.’ Labels attached to various news networks, magazines, and newspapers contribute to the conflict and division between the American public.

Even though this concern holds value, a 2017 study, *Museums and Public Opinion*, conducted by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and Wilkening Consulting, found positive results, shedding light on how the public views museums in relation to politics. In summary, the study found that the American public believes that museums are worth taxpayers’ money. Respondents believe museums are an educational and economic asset to their communities. The poll also found that the public wants more and continued federal funding for museums, and viewing their elected representatives, who support museums positively. Furthermore, the study found

¹²⁷ Katerina Kabassi, Athanasios Botonis, and Christos Karydis, "Evaluating the Websites of the Museums' Conservation Labs: The Hidden Heroes," 2018 9th International Conference on Information, Intelligence, Systems and Applications (IISA), Zakynthos, Greece, 2018, pp. 1-4, doi: 10.1109/IISA.2018.8633679.

this to be true across all political parties, rural and city residents, both voters and non-voters, even among non-consistent museum visitors.¹²⁸

The uncertainty history workers may have in relation with online interpretation and the integration of current events can be further eased with a National Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage Study (NAAU) study, conducted by IMPACTS Research & Development. The company's clients include: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the U.S. Department of State, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. In partnership with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Monterey Bay Aquarium,¹²⁹ IMPACTS provides data analysis about consumer behaviors helping to inform their clients of their target audiences.¹³⁰ The NAAU study found that in a survey of approximately 100,000 adults, art, history, science, and natural science museums are perceived as both-highly credible and a trustworthy source in comparison to other organizations, including non-government organizations (NGO), daily newspapers, and government agencies.¹³¹

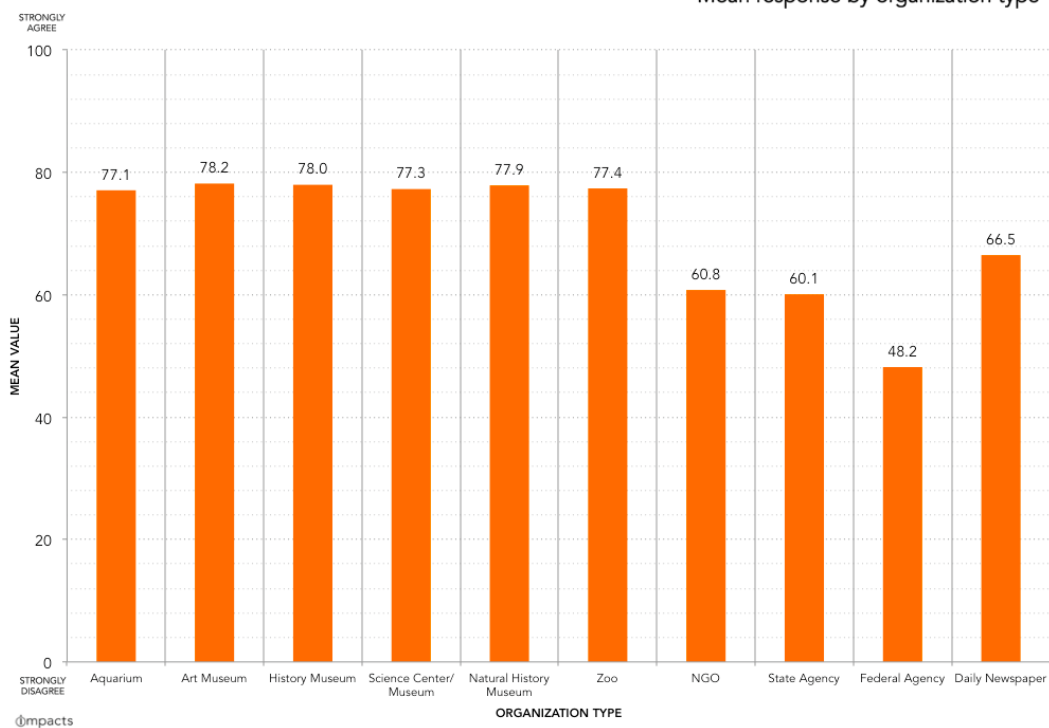
¹²⁸ "Museums & Public Opinion-American Alliance of Museums," American Alliance of Museums, Wilkening Consulting, January 20, 2018, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Museums-Public-Opinion-Excerpt.pdf>

¹²⁹ "About the Data on KYOB," Colleen Dilenschneider Know Your Own Bone, IMPACTS, 2018, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.colleendilen.com/the-data/>.

¹³⁰ "IMPACTS Research & Development," IMPACTS: Intelligence Models to Predict Actionable Solutions, 2017, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.impact-iq.com/>.

¹³¹ "In Museums We Trust. Here's How Much (DATA UPDATE)," Colleen Dilenschneider Know Your Own Bone, IMPACTS, 2018, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/>.

... is a highly credible source of information.
 Mean response by organization type

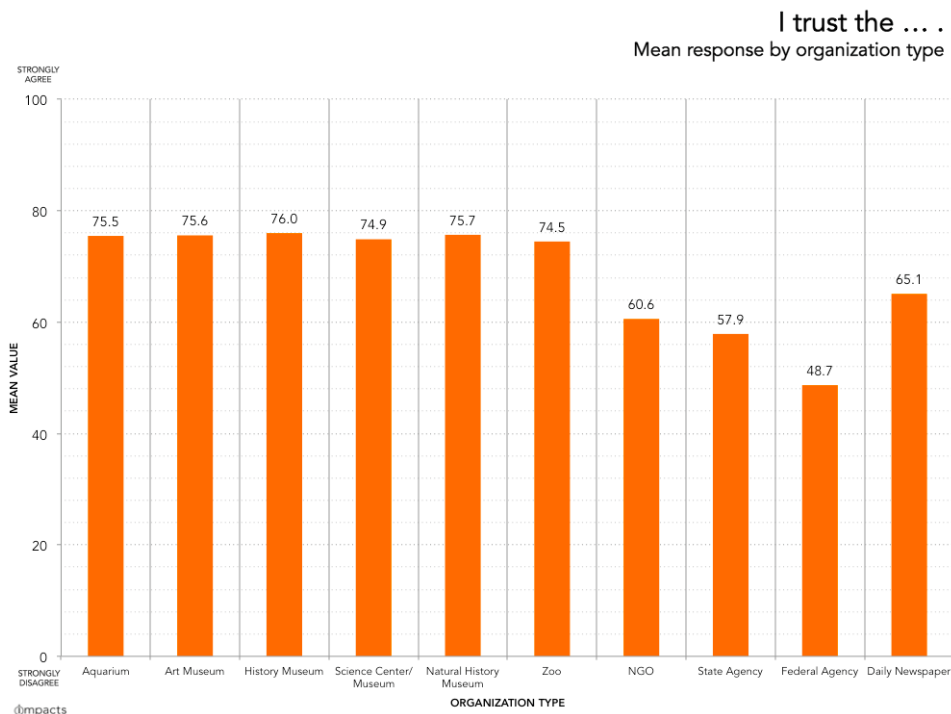


[Figure 1. National Awareness, Attitude, and Usage study update 2019 bar chat, by IMPACTS

Research and Development company. Image downloaded from

<https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/> in

September 2020.]



[Figure 2. National Awareness, Attitude, and Usage study update 2019 bar chat, by IMPACTS Research and Development company. Image downloaded from <https://www.colleendilen.com/2019/03/06/in-museums-we-trust-heres-how-much-data-update/> in September 2020.]

After reviewing this information, history workers can be assured that interpreting current events through the means of online interpretation will be welcomed by audiences. According to this study, museums possess a high level of trust and credibility with the public. Therefore, the interpretation of events such as social movements or congressional investigations, can give audiences historical context and an understanding of why and how the events occur, offering clarity to an overwhelmed public.

Many of the Literature Review authors used guidelines to provide history workers the tools to improve, organize, and maximize the success for their historic house museums. However, there are few tools dedicated to using digital platforms, such as the internet, to a historic site's advantage, resulting in the topic in online interpretation to be underdeveloped. Many house museum staff are left to their own devices to research, develop, execute, and review their own guidelines. Furthermore, previous authors throughout the Literature Review, despite the various topics and methods used to form the author's guideline, follow a similar pattern: self-examination, research, and development, followed by trial runs of new or changed programs, ending with a review of these changes, including visitor feedback to determine the degree of success. Therefore, it is the goal of this paper to do the heavy lifting for historic house museum staff, and amend the common guideline structure with the following steps:

1. Dedicate time to examine and evaluate the historic house museum. Provide staff with a clear understanding of the site's mission, the interpretive goals, and how they are accomplished.
2. After examining the site, staff should define and determine the effectiveness of the historic house museum's interpretive goals; subsequently altering policy and operations to connect and better illustrate the house museum's value to evolving audiences.
3. Staff at the historic house museum need to identify significant themes and form new interpretive narratives to be expressed through the historic house museum's interpretive programming, including exhibits and tours.

4. Present these developed programs to a sample of the site's target audiences.

Following an appropriate amount of data, including visitor feedback, predetermined by the staff, evaluate and make the necessary improvements in response.

For smaller, lesser-known house museums without continuous financial support from a large stream of tourists, achieving repetitive visitation can be difficult. However, the chosen house museums: James Madison's Montpelier, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, Gracie Mansion and Alice Austen House Museum, serve as case studies because these historic sites represent smaller house museums that have followed these steps and found success, from which these guidelines measure.

History workers should also note that online interpretation, as well as other interpretation topics, brings its benefits and challenges. Therefore, when conducting research and developing major themes, staff should also be conscious that a part of the interpretive process includes examining the external world and evaluating the self-contained environment of a historic house museum. House museums represent a singular historic moment in time. However, continued success arises from timeless contextual themes that hold relevance to people of every era connected through current events in which the site's mission can speak—introduced to audiences by up-to-date interpretive and communitive tools.

CHAPTER 4: Historic House Museum Case Studies

Paul F. Marty's article, "Museum Websites and Museum Visitors: Digital Museum Resources and their Use," further supports the theory that a museum's website is as essential to the success of a museum as its programming and exhibits. Marty's article summarizes an online exploratory survey to approximately 1200 respondents who visited nine museums' websites from October 2005 to October 2006.¹³² The full survey, published in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, concluded that audiences absorb digital museum resources into their daily lives, determine the role of museum websites, and expect their experiences to be distinct from the physical museum. From these results, Marty suggests that websites should be developed through a "visitor-centered approach."¹³³

After compiling answers from respondents, the survey found on the subject of online experiences, that "75.6% of survey respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that museum websites should take advantage of the online environment to present unique experiences that cannot be duplicated in museums."¹³⁴ No more can these expectations be more relevant than during this unusual time when we are virtually experiencing museums and house museums as the only option for much of the population.

¹³² Paul F. Marty, "Museum Websites and Museum Visitors: Digital Museum Resources and Their Use," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, no. 1 (2008): 81-99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770701865410>

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

Moreover, Stanford University historian Melissa de Witte's article, "How pandemics catalyze social and economic change," states that pandemics are often the cause for exposure of inequality and action towards large-scale social change.¹³⁵ Although in this instance, world governments, organizations, and scientific labs are actively working to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Large-scale social movements for racial and gender equality have profoundly impacted the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many industries, including museums, with unique and difficult challenges. Nevertheless, many house museums have risen to the occasion, finding opportunities and inventions to continue their audiences' access. They show visitors relevance through their websites, presenting exhibits and programs about recent social events.

The following historic house museums have all accomplished these steps, executing them through their site's online content successfully: James Madison's Montpelier, Jane Addams Hull House, Gracie Mansion, and the Alice Austen House. For example, these house museums have successfully adapted tours, exhibits, and events to serve modern audiences better, and are utilizing current sociopolitical events, movements, and debates to bridge the historic site's narrative to visitors' life experiences. For many sites, their digital content's quality and ultimate success would be challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing public outings, or closing museums: leaving virtual visitation as the only option for citizens to explore and experience historic house museums. Due to the staff's resolve at the aforementioned

¹³⁵ Melissa de Witte, "Past Pandemics redistribution income between the rich and poor, according to Stanford historian," Stanford University News, April 30, 2020, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/04/30/pandemics-catalyze-social-economic-change/>.

house museums, they have been able to rally behind their websites and take exhibits, events, and other materials intended to be experienced in a physical space and transition them to a digital platform.

Historic House Museums Virtual Tours

Although traditional docent-led tours remain the primary means of communication between house museums and the narratives staff wish to project to audiences, they have been criticized within the last several years by museum professionals as dull, standardized into predictability, and an outdated method to engage audiences. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, history workers, including those mentioned in the literature review, have ventured into finding ways to restructure tours to engage audiences and remain informative. Layered with the pandemic's difficulties, followed by catalytical social movements, the virtual tour has become the sole tool that staff can use to revitalize, reimagine, and re-engage audiences. Producing a variety of tours in approachability, look, and interactive level, staff can fit the ranging needs, goals, and public's desires for their online content.

James Madison's Montpelier

First, the staff at Montpelier have found an inventive method for guests to explore the historic site virtually. An unconventional approach to virtual tours, *Unlocking Montpelier*, invites online visitors to prepare for reopening after the pandemic by making donations to build and open a digital, interactive map of Montpelier. With each donation, sections of the house museum are opened to the public to explore and learn.

Additionally, virtual viewers are given behind-the-scenes access to staff operations, pulling back the curtain on how museum professionals research, curate an exhibit, arrange rooms, and discover stories from Montpelier's past inhabitants through archeological and archival work.¹³⁶

Initially, a person may assume that charging online visitors to interact with a website would be a risky, if not flawed idea to connect with audiences. However, visitors' online access to the museum while it is shut down during a pandemic not only financially benefits the museum; but provides universal access to the exhibits.

Unlocking Montpelier has led to a surprising result with several of the rooms unlocked and free for public consumption, including the Portico, Sitting Room, Drawing Room, New Library, and James Madison's bedroom.¹³⁷ Once a room is unlocked, online visitors can browse through a plethora of content from a series of informative videos borrowed from the site's YouTube channel to archeological photos, and digitized archival illustrations.¹³⁸ It can be argued that the staff's nontraditional approach to virtual tours benefits their institution greatly by producing a captivated audience, that wants to return to the website, unlock new sections of the museum, and be a part of a shared experience with Montpelier's online community.

Montpelier's virtual tour was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and similarly to the pandemic, *Unlocking Montpelier* requires collaboration for the benefit of others. Historic house museums have the freedom to convert online content

¹³⁶ "Unlocking Montpelier," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7a6e9cc7756e4e12b5b1b3eb024b0d5b>.

¹³⁷ "Unlocking Montpelier," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹³⁸ "Unlocking Montpelier," accessed October 5, 2020.

that best fits their institution's purpose. The method history workers have developed suits their house museum's mission because it adheres to James Madison's idea that power and governance lie in the willingness of citizens working towards a united goal to enjoy the results.

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

Although the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum is an arguably smaller institute in terms of the budget, the staff have developed a successful virtual tour with several modifications in response to the pandemic and current social events involving protests and intense advocacy for race equality. To tour the house museum virtually, online visitors' "click-n-drag" through a series of white location circles and black speaker symbols appearing on the screen. Under the self-guided virtual tour, it is within the guest's control to determine the amount of time spent on each text panel, display, and object they come across and digest: they are able to set their own pace using the speaker icon.¹³⁹

A benefit, arguably, provided only by a virtual experience, is that guests are in their own space with the ability to process thought-provoking exhibits, in their own time, without outside pressure from staff or other guests as they would if they were experiencing the house museum physically.

Online visitors familiarize themselves with the three staff members who provide the voiceovers, essentially acting as virtual docents for visitors by reading aloud text

¹³⁹ "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/virtual-tours-at-hullhouse>.

panels, providing supplementary context information for objects, displays, and portraits. This gives audiences a feeling of human interaction and conversation, an element much needed during times of social distancing and isolation.

The history workers substituting as tour guides are Jennifer Scott, Director and Chief Curator; Ross Jordan, Curatorial Manager; and Michael Ramirez, Educational Manager. Each briefly expresses why they feel Jane Addams's story, conveyed through their exhibits and programming, is essential to contributing to present societal needs, and how continuing conversations about equality and social justice for all citizens are as relevant today as they were in the early 20th century.¹⁴⁰ Further supporting the illusion of human conversation and a docent-led tour, the three speakers will engage audiences by asking the viewer questions to ponder during their exploration. For example, on the upper floor of the house museum, Ross Jordan explains to the guest that the mural they are viewing was completed several weeks before the sudden pandemic by two local advocates and artists.¹⁴¹ The mural documents social justice protests from 2010 to 2020 that were ignited by grassroots activism. Adjacent to the speaker icon there is a small empty section where on-site visitors have placed sticky notes as part of the piece's interactive element. Not wanting to abandon this inclusivity and engagement with audiences, virtual docent Jennifer Scott, asks the online viewers what they can do in their lives to ensure justice for all people in the years to come.¹⁴²

Further, history workers ensure that by utilizing virtual tours, online visitors can experience the exhibit currently on display at the historic site titled, *True Peace: The*

¹⁴⁰ "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁴¹ "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁴² "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," accessed October 5, 2020.

Presence of Justice. Audiences can read or listen to text panels, art installations, and objects, by employing the white location spots and speaker icons.¹⁴³ Through the use of their site's virtual tour, the staff at Jane Addams Hull-House demonstrate to their audiences that their museum is dedicated to representing women's struggle for equality, racial and ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁴⁴

Gracie Mansion

Compared to the other historic house museums, Gracie Mansion is both the residence of New York City's Mayor, currently Mayor Bill de Blasio and his wife, First Lady Chirlane McCray, and an historic house museum. Similarly, to the United States White House, Gracie Mansion must avoid political partisanship or message. It serves as the home of an elected official, with strong political influence, but continues as a public, non-political historic site. Balancing their site's duality, the staff at Gracie Mansion actively took steps to focus on non-political elements of the house museum, crafting the institutions' website around their current exhibit and public programming.

Contrary to James Madison's Montpelier and the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, which developed virtual tours to encompass the historic site as a whole, Gracie Mansion elected to create a tour on a smaller scale, that focuses around their featured exhibit: *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, an installation of artworks from the 1960s to 2020 by local city artists "celebrating the power of art to spark change and spur progress."¹⁴⁵ The virtual tour for Gracie Mansion is a video of the house museum's

¹⁴³ "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ "Virtual Tours at Hull-House," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Gracie Mansion, "Catalyst: Art and Social Justice Virtual Tour," NYC: First Lady Chirlane McCray, accessed October 5, 2020, 8:17, <https://www.graciemansion.org/catalyst-art-and-social-justice-virtual-tour/>.

interior where in eight short minutes guests view all the artwork. Although the video tour is accompanied by varying instrumental music, there is no voice guide or text that identifies the artworks, artists, or why Gracie Mansion deems them significant to be a part of their historic site's current installation.¹⁴⁶

The lack of explanatory information on the video may lead a viewer to believe that site's virtual tour requires further development compared to other house museums. As stated beforehand, the history workers have adapted online content to fit their historic site's specific goals. In the case of Gracie Mansion, videographer A. J. Falco created the virtual tour as a supplementary element to support the exhibit—having online visitors experience the tour as a promotion of *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice* rather than a virtual walkthrough of the site itself. Online visitors can satisfy their interests with further exploration of the online exhibit in detail, discussed in this chapter's section.

Alice Austen House

As an important site for women and the LGBTQ+ community, staff at this house museum have created several unique tours stemming from one virtual platform. The museum's virtual tour's core concept is not unlike the "click-and-drag" tour from the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, Illinois.¹⁴⁷ In this instance, the Alice Austen House has collaborated with the digital software company, Matterport, to create a high definition, digital copy for audiences to interact with and view.¹⁴⁸ Online visitors

¹⁴⁶ "Catalyst: Art and Social Justice Virtual Tour," accessed October 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ "Welcome to The Alice Austen House Museum," Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=xBqMj7CfpEe>.

¹⁴⁸ "Matterport," Matterport, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://matterport.com/>.

have the option to manually move about the house museum resembling a “dollhouse,” with a series of white location spots or receive a virtual tour where the viewer's device (computer, phone) performs an automatic walkthrough. By having the Matterport digital copy of the house museum be the nucleus from which all virtual interaction stems, history workers have created specialty tours to cater to audience interests, including the house museum's surrounding park and garden, as well as their permanent exhibit, *New Eyes on Alice Austen*.¹⁴⁹

Unfortunately, these exhibits are unable to open to the public at the physical site due to the pandemic; but the drive to share the exhibits and their relevance to our present society has not halted. In response to their sudden closure, the staff at the Alice Austen House state on their website that they are not only extending their current *Powerful and Dangerous: The Words and Images of Audre Lorde* exhibit into next year: but they have introduced additional online content to enrich visitors' experiences.¹⁵⁰ In doing so, the impact of the exhibit's immediate relevance is not lost on audiences. By using technology to allow audiences into their historic site, staff can continue to build a relationship with their audiences.

¹⁴⁹ “Virtual Tours,” Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://aliceausten.org/virtual-tours/>.

¹⁵⁰ “Powerful and Dangerous: The Words and Images of Audre Lorde,” Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://aliceausten.org/powerful-and-dangerous/>.

Historic House Museum Online Content

The chosen historic house museums use exhibits centered around the current social justice movements to build connectivity with audiences and demonstrate their site's relevance to specific issues. James Madison's Montpelier reflected on the site's connection to slavery and its direct connection to racial inequality. The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, home of the 20th-century activist Jane Addams, focused on issues she advocated in her lifetime and the issues women fight for today. The Alice Austen House created an exhibit that explored an LGBTQ+ woman's life in the Victorian era and how Austen's identity played a critical role in her life and worked as one of the few well-known female photographers.

James Madison's Montpelier

Mere Distinction of Colour

The multi-award-winning exhibit tells a complete story of American history, self-described as a "New type of slavery exhibition,"¹⁵¹ designed to shed light on the enslaved people of Montpelier; how they fit into the broader challenges that is slavery in American history and to spark controversy to encourage conversations about slavery's continued legacy in the United States.

Audiences for this exhibit can physically experience it at Montpelier, or those who cannot travel can partly enjoy the exhibit online. Visitors can read through a detailed overview of each section of the exhibit rooms, watch videos, and listen to oral histories

¹⁵¹ "The Mere Distinction of Colour," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/resources/mere-distinction-of-colour>.

given by Montpelier descendants by exploring the webpages dedicated to the exhibit. Both the physical and online versions of the exhibit are divided into the following rooms: The North Cellar, South Cellar, and the Slave Quarters in the South Yard. Each location discusses topics about slavery.

North Cellar: This room discusses slavery as a whole and as institution that provided much of the economic foundation in which all colonies participated. It was heavily debated among the country's Founding Fathers and documents. The institution of slavery became protected by the Constitution, ultimately impacting modern society. The exhibit illustrates the connection between slavery and current racial and inequality issues, including the Black Lives Matter movement, with a ten-minute video, supplemented with an additional clip titled, "Police Body Camera."¹⁵² As expressed by one of the exhibit's descendant advisors, "We can't leave slavery in the past."¹⁵³

South Cellar: This room connected Montpelier and the enslaved population to the larger narrative of Slavery in America. Told through the use of primary letters, documents, and archeological evidence, staff and Montpelier descendants humanize the enslaved, not as a "monolithic labor force,"¹⁵⁴ but as people who loved, mourned, and missed their friends and families-emotions all people can identify with. Online

¹⁵² "The Mere Distinction of Colour," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, :24, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/6-ways-that-understanding-slavery-will-change-how-you-understand-american-freedom>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ "The Mere Distinction of Colour," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/resources/mere-distinction-of-colour>.

visitors can experience this through short archeological videos such as one titled “Liberty Pipe.”¹⁵⁵

South Yard: This area includes the reconstructed slave quarters location where Montpelier descendants further honor and humanize their ancestors by retelling their stories through oral histories, giving the descendant community of Montpelier a sense of place and connectivity to the site.¹⁵⁶ Online visitors can listen to a section of this oral history through a voice clip from Montpelier's podcast, *American Dissent*.¹⁵⁷ They lead to how staff at Montpelier have inventive ways to use their website to connect with audiences and allow them access to their historic house museum.

The Constitution Today

Staff at Montpelier connect to modern audiences through innovative uses of the site's online platform. Divided into two web pages, National Survey Results and Podcast, *American Dissent* makes up the sections of the website dedicated to exploring James Madison's founding ideas represented in the Constitution, and how those ideas are reflected in 21st-century America. The podcast is a powerful, contemporary platform used to reach audiences beyond traditional on-site programs and tours, even beyond their websites. The podcast platform accessible from nearly every mobile device allows audiences to listen without direct WIFI access. History workers also gave the podcast a

¹⁵⁵ “The Mere Distinction of Colour,” James Madison’s Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, :49, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/6-ways-that-understanding-slavery-will-change-how-you-understand-american-freedom>.

¹⁵⁶ “The Mere Distinction of Colour,” James Madison’s Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/resources/mere-distinction-of-colour>.

¹⁵⁷ “The Mere Distinction of Colour,” James Madison’s Montpelier, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/6-ways-that-understanding-slavery-will-change-how-you-understand-american-freedom>.

webpage on the website, giving access to online visitors who are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the podcast platform, and they further contextualize *American Dissent* with its purpose and episode details.¹⁵⁸

The Montpelier Podcast: *American Dissent* is about "We the people, pushing back, in the pursuit of a better America." Host Kelley Libby, from the "With Good Reason" podcast, interviews scholars from several colleges, including Saint Louis University Professor Lori Glover and Professor Michael Higginbotham from the University of Baltimore. Libby and guests reference historical events, trails, and figures to connect the country's past to the sociopolitical events of the present. Episodes detail how dissent is historically defined, what it means for citizens to dissent, and how being an active citizen is properly expressing our right to dissent against other people and our government if we disagree—arguing that disagreement or dissent is what drives positive progress and is a positive sign of a healthy country where citizens are allowed to disagree with one another, as well as their government, without fear of punishment.¹⁵⁹

Indicated by previous studies, the current American population is no longer certain which institutions are trustworthy with our increasing division. Because the public still holds museums in high regard, Montpelier saw an opportunity in the country's current tumultuous climate to give clarity to their audiences with the National Survey. As stated on the webpage:

¹⁵⁸ "About the Podcast," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/americanandissent>.

¹⁵⁹ "About the Podcast," accessed October 1, 2020.

"Today, with constitutional conversations dominating the news cycle, and public debates about our rights being challenged, diluted, or open how Americans relate to, perceive, and understand the Constitution."¹⁶⁰

The National Survey is a simple questionnaire conducted by Edelman Intelligence which asked 2,500 people in an online survey a wide span of questions about constitutional rights, including "hot topic" issues such as abortion, gun, and religious rights. Respondents are also asked their perceptions of how well Congress protects these rights. Overall, with this survey, Montpelier is looking to determine: "Is the Constitution working? For everyone equally? Is Madison's radical idea of government 'by the people' holding up to modern social shifts?"¹⁶¹ The following infographic reveals that perhaps a part of why Americans seem so divided is because we interpret the Constitution differently from one another, value different rights, and how one's race and ethnicity effect what one thinks should be protected. Moreover, online visitors to the National Survey webpage are not simply viewers; but can interact with the site by taking the survey.¹⁶² The online visitor is asked a series of questions about their demographics including race, gender, and education, followed by 26 questions, several of which are related to their views on law enforcement officers and their conduct.¹⁶³ Drawing connections to Montpelier's *Mere Distinction of Colour* exhibit briefly dives into the

¹⁶⁰ "National Survey Results," James Madison's Montpelier, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/national-survey-results> .

¹⁶¹ "National Survey Results," accessed October 1, 2020.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ "National Survey," accessed October 1, 2020.

relationship with 21st-century African Americans, racial inequality, discrimination, and the racial bias of policing in the United States.

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum

Why Women Should Vote

To coincide with the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment ratification and the 2020 presidential election featuring a female Vice-Presidential nominee, the Hull House museum looks back at the early 20th-century national movement to secure women's right to vote and their campaign for women's equality, led by grassroots leaders and advocates, Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells. The online exhibit, *Why Women Should Vote* presents images of Jane Addams' 1910 essay advocating for women's suffrage among other civil rights, and photographs of suffrage leaders to add more context to create further relevance to online visitors.¹⁶⁴ *Why Women Should Vote* features a free screening of SURGE, a documentary film about women in political office encouraging women in all walks of life to engage in politics, and how to support female candidates. Following the film, the Jane Addams Hull-House, in partnership with the Chicago History Museum and the DuSable Museum of African American History, hosted a panel discussion. Audiences can watch with their free registry of the event.¹⁶⁵

SURGE

¹⁶⁴ "Why Women Should Vote," Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, accessed October 6, 2020, 60:45, <https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/new-page-2>.

¹⁶⁵ "SURGE: Film screening and discussion," Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, accessed October 3, 2020, 60:45, <https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/programs-and-events-at-hullhouse/2020/10/1/surge-film>.

The online exhibit *Why Women Should Vote* is coupled with an open event: a virtual discussion panel with SURGE creators Hannah Rosenzweig and Wendy Sachs, along with U.S. Representative for Illinois, Lauren Underwood, one of the films' subjects. Hosted by Ross Jordan and Tracie D. Hall, registered viewers discuss why these women felt it necessary to document the country's current political climate and shifting attitudes of the American voter. Listening to Representative Underwood converse with the house museum staff, viewers learn of her hopes for the future, emphasizing her millennial generation's power, and power of people of color working toward a perfect union with representative seats held by people other than politicians, such as teachers or nurses. Knowing Underwood's ambitions for the country and her positive reaction to the film gives authenticity to the documentary and the women it followed.

The film documents three first-time candidates in small-town America: Lauren Underwood from Illinois, Jana Lynne Sanchez from Texas, and Liz Watson from Indiana. All running a grassroots campaign against longtime Republican candidates, these women are part of a surge of women running for office in "deep red" counties sparked by the 2016 presidential election. After candidate Donald Trump won the presidential election, The Women's March on Washington became one of the largest protests in American history, supplemented with a radical increase in female participation in campaigns. The film shows the daunting challenges grassroots candidates face running against seasoned politicians. Fundraising, for example takes up most of their time compared to their deep-pocketed opponents who receive lobby support and spend large amounts of money on attacks ads and, campaign events. In

contrast, Underwood, Sanchez, and Watson dealt with sexism, racism, voter identity politics, and, in some instances, election manipulation. In Watson's and Underwood's campaign county, polling sites did not have enough ballots or voting machines. While each candidate gave a whole-hearted effort, only Representative Underwood won the election.

The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum paired their online exhibit with this film because SURGE gave voice to women like Underwood, Sanchez, and Watson who are not reactionary anomalies to the 2016 election, but are part of a rising movement of women in the political arena. The Women's March on Washington represents women's realization that all the representatives do not value their rights and best interests, nor do they guarantee protection. The women interviewed in the film believe that the way to ensure that their representatives work to maintain these rights is by supporting women in political office, such as Underwood, Sanchez, and Watson, and, most importantly, using their right to vote.

Gracie Mansion

Catalyst: Art and Social Change

Attuned to the country's current moment in time, Gracie Mansion, like that of the other historic house museums, has recognized that within the past several years, the United States has experienced several cultural shifts related to civil rights, climate change, race, gender inequality, and society's general adverse attitude toward American politics and government leaders. In response to this rising turmoil, the Gracie Mansion Conservancy asked Jessica Bell Brown to curate the *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*

installation which looks through the country's social upheavals through an artistic lens, examining the link between social commentary expressed through art and contributing to social change. They rely on artists, past and present, who use their art as a metaphorical mirror reflecting and documenting societal issues strung along with the country's history.

In addition to the physical exhibit, the digital exhibit intrigues online visitors with a video tour of the installation's artworks placed throughout the historic site. Formerly explained in the virtual tour, there is no information alluding to the exhibit's themes or details about their creators' pieces. Therefore, online visitors must venture into Gracie Mansion's website to learn more about *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*. Adjusting to their closure from the public, staff have uploaded object labels about the pieces and their artists alongside an image of each artwork.¹⁶⁶ Online visitors can browse through the exhibit virtually, just as they would walk through the historic site.

Continuing the exhibit's content online, and allowing public access, staff have created the exhibit's program book as a downloadable file.¹⁶⁷ In this brochure, audiences read about *Catalyst* and learn what curator Jessica Bell Brown wanted to accomplish through the pieces chosen and express through the following seven themes:

¹⁶⁶ "Catalyst: Art and Social Justice," Gracie Mansion, accessed October 6, 2020, <https://www.graciemansion.org/current-exhibit/>.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

"Affirming Self" artists, particularly women of color such as Elizabeth Colomba, use their work to reclaim their identity, rejecting the status quo on how minorities are viewed by society and how people of color view themselves.¹⁶⁸

"Concept of Justice" is about the United States history with equal treatment to its citizens and the country's relationship towards conflict. It features artists such as Dread Scott and Martha Rosler, whose work is both anti-war activism and a source of controversy.¹⁶⁹

"E Pluribus Unum/Out of Many, One," featuring mostly Native Americans and immigrant artists, looks at how these artists define relationships they have with both their heritage and American culture. Their art represents their own identity and that of the United States' relationship with their culture.¹⁷⁰

"The Habitable Earth" has artists who reflect not only on the globally impending crisis of climate change, but the lack of effort to prevent the planet's degrading caution that has impending effects on people and their communities.¹⁷¹

"Health, Wellness, and Universal Access" focuses on the people who, throughout the country's history, have not have had full access to health care—receiving little empathy from society, resulting in an array of health epidemics and sweeping social movements for equal health care and treatment. Access to health care is particularly

¹⁶⁸ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 12-17, accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.graciemansion.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Catalyst-Program-Book_3-2020.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 18-27.

¹⁷⁰ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 28-36.

¹⁷¹ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 36-41.

important for the LGBTQ+ community and many of the artists from this community, including David Wojnarowicz, who was diagnosed with AIDS, and ultimately died from it in 1992, during the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁷²

"A Livable City" featured artists throughout the 20th century who have used their art to capture what makes cities like New York City iconic and enduring; its people, their small communities in which they make their living, and passionate activism to preserve New York City's historical architecture.¹⁷³

"Pursuit of Equality," the last theme of the Gracie Mansion exhibit, is similar to that of James Madison's Montpelier as it approaches race relations and the stark inequality African Americans face, particularly within the criminal justice system.¹⁷⁴

Gracie Mansion's physical and online exhibit *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice* presents the work of modern and contemporary artists utilizing the power of art to "question conventional wisdom, call out hypocrisy, and draw attention to major social challenges."¹⁷⁵ Curated by Jessica Bell Brown, a woman of color herself, the exhibit is intended to spark thought-provoking conversations about similarities between current and past social movements in America.

Gracie Book Club

Equivalent to SURGE, and directly correlating to the online exhibit *Why Women Should Vote*, Gracie Mansion's long-standing program, Gracie Book Club, is a program

¹⁷²Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 42-47.

¹⁷³ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 48-57.

¹⁷⁴ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 58-62.

¹⁷⁵ Gracie Mansion, *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, 1.

produced by Gracie Mansion and First Lady Chirlane McCray, a writer, editor, activist, and wife of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, to promote connectivity between the public and the historic site through several literary works. They developed a fourth season of book suggestions to supplement their current exhibit, categorizing books by their relevance to the seven themes.¹⁷⁶

Alice Austen House

New Eyes on Alice Austen

History workers at the Alice Austen House reconceptualized their narrative to memorialize Austen's life and her unique influence holistically and more accurately on American history by presenting *New Eyes on Alice Austen*, now on permanent display. Like Gracie Mansion, the staff at this house museum have angled the majority of internet traffic toward the website's intricate and immersive "3D space," a digital twin of Clear Comfort, produced by Matterport, for the public to explore the house museum virtually.

Engaging on a virtual walkthrough of the museum, online visitors will discover that *New Eyes on Alice Austen* celebrates her as a pioneering female photographer, memorialized with more than 7000 of her photographs, as well as information about her techniques and subject matter. During the infancy of photography, many people limited themselves to their homes or studios. Austen, however, traveled across New York City, capturing the daily lives of 20th-century people, including Staten Island immigrants, the

¹⁷⁶ "Gracie Book Club," Gracie Mansion, accessed October 6, 2020. <https://www.graciemansion.org/gracie-book-club/>.

working class, and women, inadvertently giving modern viewers a glimpse into their lives.¹⁷⁷

As opposed to the many male photographers in her time, Austen had the unique opportunity to document women in ways men never could in the restrictive Victorian era. In several of the exhibit's chosen photographs, Austen captures what is known as a "larky life" where women parody the conventions of social norms in a friendly setting. This is a topic that modern scholars know little about due to the lack of historical record. Her images are incredibly significant due to her queer identity as a gay woman, and her rejection of social norms pressed upon women in the rigid Victorian era.¹⁷⁸

Following the museum's 2017 recognition as a historic LGBTQ+ national site, the *New Eyes on Alice Austen* exhibit openly embraces her lesbian identity, exploring Austen's intimate and life-long relationship with Gertrude Tate.¹⁷⁹ For over 30 years, Tate was a subject of many of Austen's images and documented their lives together at Clear Comfort.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ "About Alice Austen," Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020. <https://aliceausten.org/alice-austen/>

¹⁷⁸ "Virtual Tours," Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020. <https://aliceausten.org/virtual-tours/>

¹⁷⁹ "New Eyes on Alice Austen," Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020.

<https://aliceausten.org/permanent-exhibition/>

¹⁸⁰ "About Alice Austen," Alice Austen House, accessed October 5, 2020. <https://aliceausten.org/alice-austen/>

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

In our fluid, evolving society, museums and house museums have remained a steadfast, trustworthy institution, integral to preserving the country's history and educating the public. History workers take part in unraveling past people's complexities and events through the unique perspective and comforting environment that historic house museums create for audiences to digest the themes and narrative put forth by museum staff. This statement is particularly true with "difficult history," an uncomfortable but essential part of our history and humanity. Understanding past conflicts, social issues, and injustices against varying groups of people provide the link as to why and how sociopolitical issues continue to impact present-day society. However, with many competing sources vying for the audience's attention, museum professionals must adapt new strategies to maintain engagement. The museum professionals presented throughout this thesis emphasize that narrative interpretation changes are the key to connect with audiences better, making house museum narratives more inclusive of marginalized voices.

Updating interpretation is essential to continue the museum industry's relevance in the mind of the public. This thesis introduces another critical element to ensuring success websites. By taking advantage of modern technology, such as developing engaging websites in addition to modernizing narratives with more diverse storylines, history workers are utilizing a two-front strategy that will both uplift house museums into the twenty-first century and sustain audience loyalty for decades to follow. As made evident by this thesis' arguments, institutions without a strong online presence that

reflects the goals of house museum staff will become irrelevant, archaic, and out of touch with modern audiences and their growing expectations of cultural institutions.

However, not all is lost, as history workers continue to prove they are able to adapt and be inventive. Tackling subjects such as racial injustice, including slavery, contemporary politics, and modern social issues that have been traditionally viewed as taboo or controversial subjects at house museums by staff, are now emerging as topics from which audiences can connect with our history and past peoples. The selected house museums James Madison's Montpelier, Jane Addams' Hull-House Museum, Gracie Mansion, and Alice Austen House have embraced this two-front strategy and perfectly embody the purpose of these guidelines that are designed to improve online interpretation and strengthen audience relationships.

Moreover, as time is closing for house museums to evolve, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for house museums to connect with their audience in a new way. Not only does technology, particularly websites, encourage connectivity; but it allows for historic house museums to put forth much-needed contextualization and explanation of current social movements, protests, and points of contention and connection.

In reading this thesis and taking note of its guidelines, history workers may reduce the time and energy needed to improve their institution's website. They can better utilize technology and its many digital platforms to thrust historic house museums into the twenty-first century.

Addendum

Throughout their career, museum professionals will face a number of unique challenges. Among the most pressing and pervasive challenges attached to the daily operations is financial security and the continual efforts staff and loyal volunteers embark on to secure funding for their historic sites.

Although some historic sites may struggle more than others, all museums and historic house museums seek financial assistance. Often this comes in the form of grants given by large non-profit organizations and the federal government.

Provided below are several resources for history workers who are inspired by the proposed guidelines, and are eager to improve their site's website or add online interpretation:

The National Endowment for the Humanities is dedicated to financially support nationally significant historic sites and their staff.

<https://www.ihm.gov/grants/available/save-americas-treasures>

Designed for smaller communities, the New York State Preservation Office offers support to preserve their states local treasures.

<https://parks.ny.gov/shpo/>

Additionally, there are history workers within the museum industry who are committed to supporting their peers through the Historic Houses and Sites Network within the American Alliance of Museums.

<https://www.aam-us.org/professional-networks/historic-houses-and-sites-network/>

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