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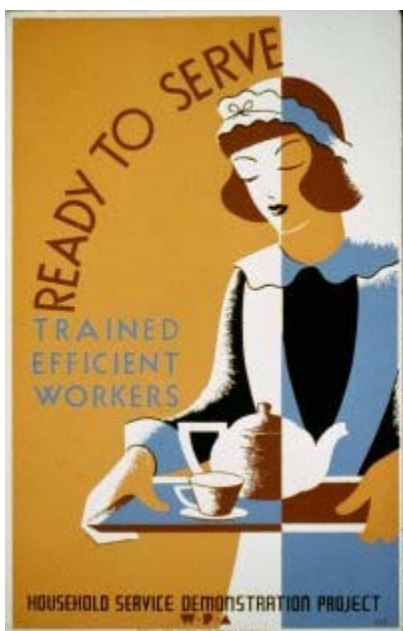
American Association for State and Local History

Historic House Museums

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS AFFINITY GROUP

Issue 4, July 2012

Beyond *Downton Abbey* and *The Help*



By Jennifer Pustz
Museum Historian, Historic New England

As an avid consumer of popular culture, I am always excited when a new television program or movie features servants as the protagonists. In that regard, the past year has been eventful one, from the new iteration of PBS's *Upstairs, Downstairs*, two seasons of its series *Downton Abbey*, and the theatrical release of *The Help*. I am not the only one who has been captivated by these stories of maids, cooks, and butlers. Over five million Americans tuned in to watch *Downton Abbey*'s second season finale.

Clearly, the American public is interested in the lives of the people behind the scenes. I have experienced this at a personal level in recent months. Several organizations, in response these programs, have invited me to present my lecture on the history of domestic service in New England.

Even if these and other popular culture depictions of servants take place in different locations and time periods than the one you interpret, they offer entry points for discussing the history of domestic service with visitors. These programs raise awareness of the presence of live-in domestics and the complexity of relationships between people of different social classes, ethnicities, and races in these very intimate workplaces. They are able to dramatize situations that are difficult to describe in detail on the average tour.

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Need Help with Volunteers?

AASLH is offering two live volunteer webinars in August. Register now to reserve your seat.

[Are You Ready for Volunteers?](#) will be held on **Tuesday, August 28** from 2-3:15 pm eastern. This webinar focuses on planning for a successful volunteer program.

The challenge, of course, is bridging the gap between the fictional depictions (which may be of varying historical accuracy) and the reality of domestic life at your site. Documenting the lives of servants is a tremendous challenge. Start by gathering as much information as possible through research in public records and secondary sources. If you haven't done so already, curl up on the couch and watch *Upstairs, Downstairs*, *Downton Abbey*, or *The Help*. Once you have a sense of what life "below stairs" may have been like for your site's staff you can make the most of visitors' interest in these programs to tell a more complete and captivating story.

Additional Resources for Interpreting Domestic Service:

Dudden, Faye E. *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.

Katzman, David M. *Seven Days A Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

O'Leary, Elizabeth L. *From Morning to Night: Domestic Service in Maymont House and the Gilded Age South*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Pustz, Jennifer. *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants' Lives at Historic House Museums*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010.

Harvard University Library Open Collections Program. *Women Working, 1800-1930*. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/>

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, American Memory Project. Chicago, Ill. : WPA, Federal Art Project, 1939.

Making Changes: Beyond Rethinking the Historic House Museum

By Gwendolen Raley
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Once upon a time, there lived an important person in a fancy old house. Many years passed, and one day, that important person died, and their fancy old house became dilapidated and threatened by destruction in the name of progress. Along came another important person who rallied others to save this fancy old house to preserve it for future generations. A new historic house museum was born. People flocked to the new museum, enjoying activities and reveling in reminders of people long passed and days gone by.

As the years wore on, those other important people began to die or move away, and the fancy old house museum became stale, hollow, and forgotten. Its paint began to peel, its roof began to leak, and the love it had received for so long began to wane. Threatened once

Developing a Successful Volunteer Recruitment Program

will be held on **Thursday, August 30** from 2-3:15 pm eastern. This webinar will help you identify the best type of volunteer for your institution and develop a plan for getting them in your door.

Registration closes August 24.



About the AASLH Historic House Affinity Group

Please feel free to forward this e-mail to colleagues. [Click here for more Historic House resources.](#)

To sign up to receive future issues of *Historic House Museum Affinity Group News*, join the AASLH Historic House Museum Affinity Group. **The Affinity Group is not a**

again by stagnation and the weathering sands of time, a small number of visionaries recognized that the fancy old house was in dire straights.

Conversations began, fundraisers were held, and big changes were proposed. Not everyone liked those big changes, but the visionaries stood their ground and found ways to make changes happen. Now the paint is fresh, the roof is fixed, and people are once-again flocking to the fancy old house to experience new and different things that have meaning to them. The visionaries made a plan to perpetually rethink, reevaluate, and ensure its survival. The fancy old house was saved once again, and everyone lived happily ever after. THE END.

Does this sound like your historic house museum (HHM)? Have you experienced a fairy tale happy ending, or not?

Since becoming Museum and Heritage Tourism Director for Indiana Landmarks in February 2009, I have been rethinking operations and working to revitalize [Morris-Butler House](#), an 1865 Victorian-era HHM whose initial rescue in the 1960s by Eli Lilly sparked the urban renewal and preservation movement in Indianapolis, Indiana. The process has been long and has included grant writing, visits with consultants, conversations with stakeholders and other industry professionals, as well as conducting abundant research. The end goal is to reinvigorate this meaningful historic place to ensure its longevity and sustainability in the 21st century.

Museum professionals have been grappling for well over a decade with the question of how to make once-vibrant – and now deliquescing – HHMs more relevant to their communities and sustainable for the future. Much has been written regarding the need for self-reflection upon the existence of the HHM, its purpose, and why it matters. Overwhelmingly, museum professionals have collectively come to the same conclusion: HHMs must change to adapt to the evolving world around them, but there is no one size fits all solution that can be employed in all cases. Moreover, fairy tale endings do not occur for many HHMs.

While the solution for each HHM may be different because each site has its own unique set of circumstances, advantages, and limitations, the approach to implement change may be similar in many cases. Once a need to change is identified and a plan for change has been outlined, change is only possible when the people involved are willing to take the steps necessary to implement it. How do we approach each unique solution and set the wheels of change in motion?

Here are a few suggested tactics:

- **Attract buy-in from your stakeholders.** Garnering support for change is integral to making it happen. Openly communicate with your stakeholders and facilitate two-way conversations to understand their needs, concerns, and unique perspectives; seize these conversations as opportunities to educate your stakeholders about the reasons

membership organization and there is no fee to join. However, you will need to create a username and password and share your basic contact information. Go to the [historic house webpage](#) and click on “**Join the Historic House Affinity Group**” link at the top of the page and then on “Don't have a Login? Click here.”

For more information about all of AASLH's programs and services, visit <http://aaslh.org/>

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**Historic House
Issues Featured at
AASLH Annual
Meeting**

We hope you are planning on joining us in Salt Lake City, UT, for the [AASLH Annual Meeting on October 3-6, 2012](#).

There are several great sessions and events planned for historic house museum staff and volunteers.

why change is needed and the plan for implementing it. A [Museum Assessment Program](#) (MAP) report prepared by [Linda Norris](#) in 2010 – and the internal conversations it generated – led to the hiring of consultants Jim Vaughn and [Max van Balgooy](#), both formerly of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in 2011. The assessments from these industry experts echoed internal assessments that change is needed at Morris-Butler House and provided a starting point for achieving it.

- **Lead by example.** “You must be the change you wish to see in the world,” said Mahatma Gandhi. Your stakeholders will be more willing to embrace change if they see you doing so. Be a champion for your cause.
- **Be flexible and open to new ideas.** Recognize that the path to change is not paved with ease and speed; there will be potholes, roadblocks, and flashing lights along the way. When you get a flat tire, roadside assistance may come in the form of a new idea or opportunity from where you least expect it. Reach out for help when you need it.
- **Recognize that change takes time.** Do not be discouraged if change takes longer than you anticipated. It will take time to conduct research, garner internal and external support, and implement new endeavors. Do not be afraid to try new things and possibly fail at some of them. Make adjustments where necessary.
- **Maintain realistic expectations.** We all want a fairy tale ending in which our HHM lives on happily ever after, but this is not realistic. Some will survive; others will transition to a life after the HHM. All HHMs will need to be rethought again in the future as the world continues to evolve. An ending is truly only an ending if the HHM ceases to physically exist (e.g. demolition, rot, etc.).

For Morris-Butler House and many other HHMs, the ending is not yet written, and more work is to be done to enact change. Morris-Butler House’s solution will be to support the work of its parent organization, Indiana Landmarks, through its operations while maintaining the historical essence of the site and allowing for greater diversity and flexibility in programming. This strategy is mission-based and capitalizes on the strengths of Indiana Landmarks and its staff while blending the needs of the organization and community. Like many others, a fairy tale ending is not expected for this HHM, but through much hard work and big rethinking, effective changes will continue to happen, leading Morris-Butler House toward a renewed existence.

On Wednesday, October 3, there will be a full-day workshop on [The Rembrandt Rule](#) focusing on how to develop tiered collections to create hands-on programs in historic houses.

Sessions throughout the meeting will examine different aspects of historic house management and interpretation. Topics include: Too Important to Fail: Historic House Museums Meet Communities' Needs; Business Models and Earned Income for Historic Houses; Re-imagining Historic Sites: Three Roads to the Same Destination; Historic Places as Museums: Crossroads of Expectations; and Paranormal Policies.

Other general subject sessions will highlight topics such as boards, interpretation, staff training, community engagement and more.

Plan now to join us in Salt Lake City. The early bird registration deadline is August 17.

[Download the Preliminary Program Guide.](#)

[Register for the AASLH 2012 Annual Meeting.](#)

