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Historic House Museums

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS AFFINITY GROUP

Issue 6, May 2013

Exhibitions in Historic Houses?, Part II

By Jacob Barry
Museum of Science, Boston,
MA

The [previous article](#) in this series addressed how to select an appropriate space in a historic house museum for an exhibit. This entry provides suggestions for the curatorial and installation issues that may arise.



Many historic house museums don't have the budget to develop spectacularly designed exhibits showcasing precious artifacts in beautifully lit glass vitrines. However, even with limited resources there are ways that house museums can use exhibits to showcase underused collections items.

Historic house museums often have diverse collections with numerous items that do not fit in the house's interpretive scheme. Exhibits provide a chance to display these artifacts, but the expense of cases and mounts can prove a barrier. However, there are usually many artifacts in a collection, such as tools and other durable goods, with historic interest but that may not require the highest level of protection and conservation. It is still important that these objects are cared for and displayed well, but too often objects that appear common and unremarkable to museum staff simply sit in storage even though they retain their potential to delight and inform visitors, and are easier to display than more delicate items.

Another approach is to dispense with artifacts altogether and simply use pictures and text to tell a story. High quality scans of photographs or archival materials can be printed on sturdy panels. This alleviates many conservation and security concerns, while still allowing visitors to have an authentic experience with historical

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Collections Management and Practices

Collections Management and Practices Workshop

**July 11-12, 2013
Bryn Mawr College,
Bryn Mawr, PA**

Participants will learn about their institution's responsibility toward its collection, the necessary policies and procedures, and the best practices of collection management. During lively group discussions and hands-on

materials.

Once the content of an exhibit has been established, an installation must be designed that will help guide the visitor through the exhibit space. The best solution for installing exhibits in historic houses has been developed by consultant Will Twombly, who advocates using hollow core doors. These allow a museum to subdivide a room into separate spaces, and create much more wall space for installation. The doors can also be mounted on wheels to allow for quick room conversions in cases where a gallery must also be used for programming and other activities.

Collections objects of all sorts can be used to tell educational and entertaining stories. Historic house museums might not be able to mount elaborate exhibits like larger museums, but they can still utilize their collections in ways that go beyond furnishing period rooms.

The next article in this series will focus on conservation and security in exhibits. Photo Courtesy of Historic New England.

Free Historic House Call in June

Business Models for Historic Sites
June 12, 1:30 pm eastern

*Moderated by Joshua Campbell Torrance, Woodlawn Museum
Led by Kenneth C. Turino, Historic New England*

Historic House Calls give staff and volunteers with historic house museums the chance to hear from a leading expert on a topic related to historic sites and ask questions about that topic. The AASLH Historic House Affinity Group offers these quarterly at no charge. **There is a limited number of spots for the live event. Preregistration is required.**

This session will look beyond traditional models for historic houses and discuss examples of ways small institutions are addressing the issue of earned income through creative programs and new revenue streams. Be prepared to share your ideas and ask questions!

[Click here to register or more information.](#)

So-and-So Born Here, So What?



*By Seth C. Bruggeman
Temple University*

Several years ago I had a remarkable encounter with George Washington or, more accurately, the place where he was born. The National Park Service had hired me to write an administrative history of its

activities, participants will become familiar with current issues and trends to better understand how collections fit within the context of history organizations.

Participants will explore other topics including the role of collections in exhibition and interpretation, the basic steps of collections management from acquisition to disposal, professional standards and ethics, conservation on a shoe-string budget, as well as learning about the multitude of resources available for collections preservation.

Who Should Attend: This workshop is targeted to new professionals and dedicated volunteers with responsibility for collections.

Cost: \$270 members/\$345 nonmembers; **\$40 discount if fee is received by June 5.**





Washington Birthplace National Monument, and

although I've never been much for founding-father hagiography, this particular project fascinated me. At its core, I discovered, was a simple question that had frustrated superintendents, foiled interpreters, and lured stakeholders into outright hostilities for nearly eighty years. It amounted to this: Who cares where George Washington was born?

The answer, of course, is extremely complicated. And it's not unique to Washington. It doesn't take much looking to see that birthplace commemoration – present in everything from roadside markers to historic house museums – is ubiquitous in this country. What's more, birthplace anxiety runs deep in American political culture. Just recall the 2008 presidential campaigns during which it inspired attacks against John McCain and Barak Obama, both of whom faced allegations that neither had been born in the United States.

So why are Americans obsessed with birth? I and others suggest some answers in a new book titled *Born in the U.S.A.* But for those of us who work at or with historic house museums where birth memory figures prominently, finding answers is probably less important than simply asking the question. In our celebration of famous births, like Washington's, we often forget that birth is not significant for babies alone. Like most of us who get born, after all, Washington had a mother. How did his birth impact her life? And what of Washington's surrogate mothers, drawn from his family's slaves?

More significantly, if the place where Washington was born so fundamentally shaped his adult life – a common theme at commemorative birthplaces – then why did it not elevate others born there to similar heights? We must ask this question at historic birthplaces because it confronts visitors with a hard truth: whose births we remember and why is as much a question of politics as it is a question of historical significance. It's a question that reminds us just how powerfully historic house museums can figure in civic dialogue, especially in a nation where millions of people still struggle against policies that factor birthplaces into the hazy calculus of citizenship.

For More on Birthplace Commemoration:

Seth C. Bruggeman, ed., *Born in the USA: Birth and Commemoration in American Public Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

----, *Here, George Washington was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

Henry James, *The Birthplace* (1903; Reprint Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin: The making of an American icon," in *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Paul A. Shackel (Gainesville: University

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 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/>

Press of Florida, 2001).

Aaron Santesso, "Birth of the Birthplace: Bread Street and Literary Tourism before Stratford," *English Literary History* 71 (Summer 2004): 377-403.

Patricia West, "'The Bricks of Compromise Settle into Place': Booker T. Washington's Birthplace and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).



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