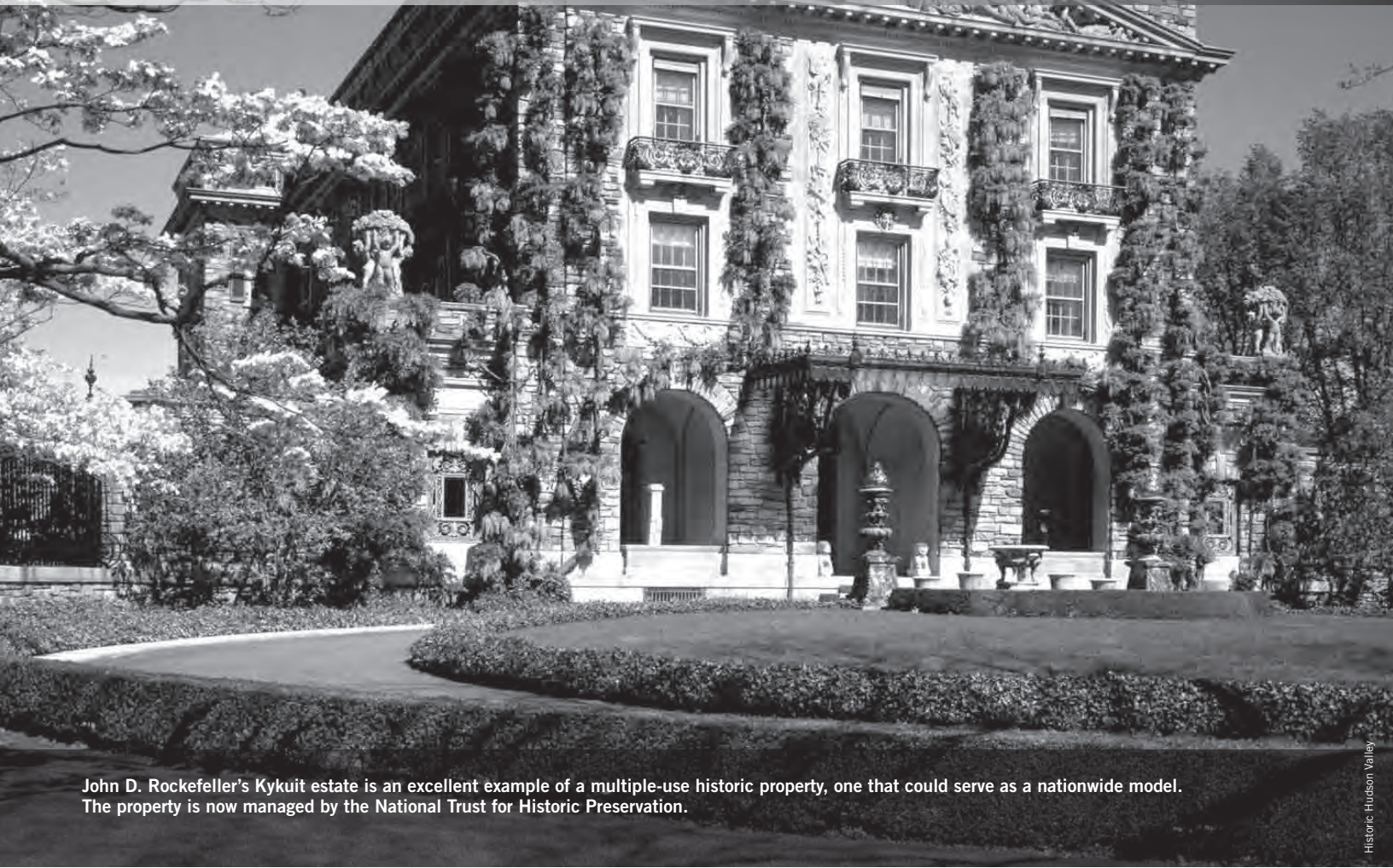


THE KYKUIT II SUMMIT: *The Sustainability of Historic Sites*



John D. Rockefeller's Kykuit estate is an excellent example of a multiple-use historic property, one that could serve as a nationwide model. The property is now managed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Historic Hudson Valley

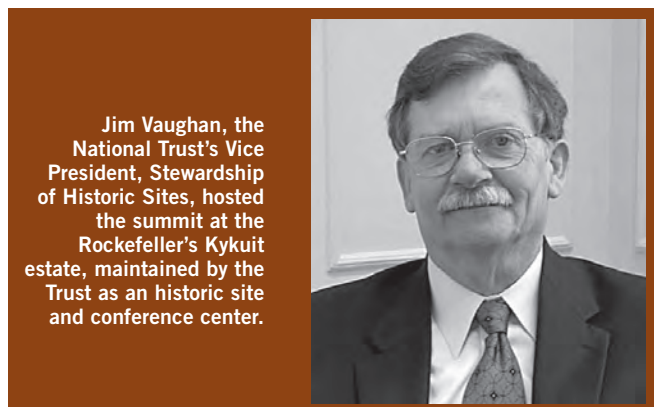
BY JAY D. VOGT

EDITOR'S NOTE: The American Architectural Foundation, AASLH, the American Association of Museums, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation sponsored the second Kykuit conference, hosted by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. This report was written by the author based on materials prepared for the meeting and on the discussions that took place there. It reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of other conference participants, the sponsors, or the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Over thirty leaders of historic sites, representatives of grant-making agencies, and representatives of national service organizations met at Kykuit in Tarrytown, NY, April 23-25, 2007, to discuss one of the most pressing issues facing the history field today—the sustainability of historic sites. This was the second Kykuit Conference. The first, held five years ago,

initiated an ongoing discussion about the future of this, the largest segment of the museum community.

Standards and best practices, models of innovation and success, alternative uses for historic sites, and expectations of historic sites and funders were the focus of the three-day meeting. Jim Vaughan, Vice President, Stewardship of Historic Sites for the National Trust for Historic



Jim Vaughan, the National Trust's Vice President, Stewardship of Historic Sites, hosted the summit at the Rockefeller's Kykuit estate, maintained by the Trust as an historic site and conference center.

Sandra Smith



Billings Farm and Museum

New approaches used by many historic sites reflect an acknowledgement that non-traditional museum activities are also appropriate for an historic site. This approach involves the community in decision-making while still recognizing and celebrating the historic significance of the property. Above: Students from Barnard Central School (VT) experience the history of dairy farming in central Vermont at the Billings Farm and Museum. Right: An educator discusses immigration history at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.



Lower East Side Tenement Museum

Preservation, facilitated the meeting, which featured breakout sessions that provided participants with case studies and discussion topics. Participants worked to develop a list of findings concerning the state of historic sites and a set of recommendations to assist in directing the future of these properties. The group used the term “historic site” to be more inclusive than just historic houses and to stress the importance of the grounds and landscape as well.

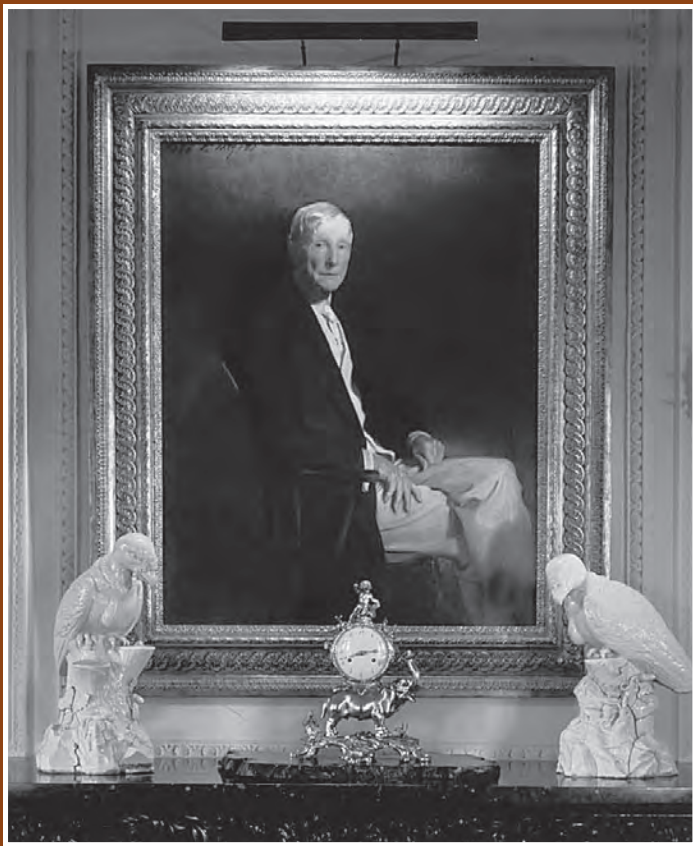
Prior to the meeting, participants were asked to prepare by reading a variety of articles that not only provided food-for-thought but also challenged some of the basic premises of the historic site business. The articles included: “A Golden Age for Historic Properties” by John and Anita Nowery Durel (*History News*, Summer 2007); “Are There Too Many House Museums?” by Richard Moe (*Forum Journal*, Spring 2002); “The Elephant in the Board Room” by Kim Klein, Amanda Ballard, and Manami Kano (*Grassroots Fundraising Journal*, March/April 2006); and “Rules for a New Demographic Ballgame” by Ron Crouch (*Museum News*, May/June 2004), among others. Each article offered insight into the unique challenges that historic sites face in the twenty-first century.

Katherine Kane, Executive Director of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, provided opening commentary on

evolving standards and best practices for the field. Kane reported that in its twenty-five year history, the AAM accreditation program has accredited only about 800 out of an estimated 17,000 museums. Of that group, only twenty-five percent are history museums and eight percent are historic sites. She stated that one reason history museums are under-represented may be that the accreditation process places more emphasis on museum collections and less on interpretation, public programming, and sense of place—elements crucial to a successful historic site. Many historic sites have broadened their definition of museum to include their use as community resources, something not as highly emphasized in the current accreditation structure. Rather than follow a series of hard and fast standards, historic sites may benefit from guidelines that offer best practices in their day-to-day operations. This approach frees historic sites to seek community partnerships, establish relevance to the audience, and embrace alternatives in operations and function.

Donna Harris, author of *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America’s Historic Houses* (see pages 12 to 16), provided opening remarks on the topic of alternative uses for historic sites. As revenue, grant support, and the number of visitors to history museums dwindle, questions about the sustainability of existing historic

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Historic Hudson Valley



Historic Hudson Valley

The family house, formal gardens, and sculpture collections of the Kykuit estate remain as a museum. Guest rooms on the upper floors of the house support a conference center. Left: Portrait of John D. Rockefeller, 1917. Above: Portraits of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington in Rockefeller's Kykuit home.

sites and the advisability of opening new ones become paramount. Harris focused on working models for converting historic house museums or historic sites into new uses.

The session on models of success and innovation included presentations on new approaches being used by Historic New England, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the Billings Farm and Museum, the National Trust properties, and the Heritage Philadelphia Program. Today, successful historic sites are preserving significant historical artifacts, buildings, and structures while meeting community needs in providing educational programs and cultural experiences. The challenge lies in acknowledging that an adoption of non-traditional museum activities or purposes may be appropriate for a house museum or an historic site. Involving the community in the decision-making process and recognizing and celebrating the historic significance of the property are important components in these approaches.

Marian Godfrey, Managing Director of Culture and Civic Initiatives for The Pew Charitable Trusts, initiated discussion on the question, “Do historic sites and funders have different needs and expectations?” History organizations and funders do have different needs and expectations, and this session provided an excellent dialog between the two groups.

The available public and private grant programs for museums are not getting larger, while the number of museums continues to grow. Godfrey outlined five areas to which all nonprofits—including historic sites—need to respond to:

- 1) **Digital technology** and the fundamental way it is changing management of historic sites;
- 2) **Changing audiences** that require both different types of programs but also different styles in how and when they are provided;
- 3) **Leadership succession;**
- 4) **Undercapitalization of funds and personnel** for historic sites;
- 5) **The challenge of better defining the cultural value** of historic properties. For many historic sites, money equals success; but for funders, success equals money. Some history institutions do not have a realistic vision of their viability, and funders are beginning to “stop the drip” of financial support to those historic sites that are not capable of sustaining themselves.

Complementing this discussion was the introduction of the American Association for State and Local History’s initiative to help history museums, historic houses, and historical organizations achieve national standards. Supported by a three-year Institute for Museum and Library Services grant, the project will develop and pilot a standards program for small- and mid-sized history institutions and create a

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framework of assistance through state, regional, or national associations that serve historic sites, history museums, and historical societies. The project will develop and make available assessment materials, best practices, and other resources in six areas: 1) mission, vision, and governance; 2) audience; 3) interpretation; 4) collections; 5) historic structures and landscapes; and 6) management. Although developed independently from the Kykuit conference, the project fits the findings and recommendations of the meeting and its outcomes should be much-utilized by the field.

At the conclusion of the Kykuit summit, participants developed a draft list of thirteen findings and eleven recommendations. The findings focused not only on the financial sustainability of historic sites but also on their ongoing ability to serve the community, steward collections and property, and provide professional levels of operations and accomplishments. The recommendations will act as a call to action for all national and statewide service organizations to assist historic sites in their current and future operations. Funders are challenged to assist historic sites in building capacity for long-term sustainability. And the historic site field as a whole is called upon to experiment and recognize successful models for change as well as sustainable operations. (A complete list of the findings and recommendations is on page 21.)

The Kykuit estate is an excellent example of a multiple-use historic property and is one that could serve as a nationwide model. John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil, built Kykuit as a hilltop getaway. Home to four generations of Rockefellers, the property is now an historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and contains the Pocantico Conference Center. Kykuit, the family house, as

well as the surrounding formal gardens and sculpture collections, remain as a museum. However, guest rooms on the upper floors of the house support the conference center. The historic Coach Barn still contains the horse stables and automobile garage, but the facility has been converted into the Pocantico Conference Center containing meeting and guest rooms and the headquarters of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Historic sites are important cultural properties. An emotional as well as practical case can easily be made that it is in the public interest that they continue to exist. Many of these institutions hold significant collections and have a valuable story to tell. Nevertheless, the unmentionable questions—"Does America need another house museum?" or "Can America effectively support the existing historic sites it now has?"—are not new. Articles and presentations that address these questions have been appearing for the past several years and both Kykuit conferences have addressed these critical questions. Although the 2007 meeting resulted in a list of findings and recommendations, the discussion is not closed. A number of sessions on this subject will be presented at the annual conferences and meetings of the American Association of Museums, AASLH, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and various state and regional museum association meetings. These discussions can arouse our passions and give us an opportunity to find solutions in this time of change and transition. ●

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Linda Mitchell creates rich visual assemblages in mixed media paintings, sculpture and installations. Her work stems from deep Southern roots incorporating regional traditions of quilting, storytelling and buried meaning.

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KYKUTT 2007 SUMMIT

FINDINGS

- Successful stewardship of the nation's historic sites requires financial sustainability.
- Sustainability begins with each historic site's engagement with its community and its willingness to change its structure, programs, and services in response to the changing needs of that community.
- The long-accepted tourism business model is not a sustainable business model for most historic sites.
- Serving the needs of the local community (not the tourist audience) is the most valuable and most sustainable goal for most historic sites.
- Attendance figures are not the most valid measure of the positive value and impact of the historic site experience.
- Many professional standards and practices in the historic site field were borrowed from the museum community and, in practice, often deter creativity and sustainability at historic sites.
- New standards of stewardship for historic sites should be modeled to reflect the distinct nature of these places.
- Responsible site stewardship achieves a sustainable balance between the needs of the buildings, landscapes, collections, and the visiting public.
- The buildings, landscapes, and collections are the means but not the ends of the work of historic sites.
- Innovation, experimentation, collaboration, and a broad sharing of the resulting information are essential to achieving historic site sustainability on a broad scale.
- Undefined collecting, coupled with professional standards and practices regarding deaccessioning, are impediments to change and sustainability.
- Program, challenge, and matching grants can reduce long-term sustainability by shifting focus away from operating and endowment needs and by encouraging the growth of non-mission-related programs.
- Returning sites to private ownership with proper easements can be a positive means of assuring long-term stewardship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The AASLH Task Force on Standards should seek to establish an appropriate stewardship balance for the needs of buildings, landscapes, collections, and the public.
- The AASLH Ethics Committee should prepare a positive statement to guide the transitioning of historic sites and returning them to private stewardship.
- The National Trust and others should experiment with responsible situational standards for collections, buildings, and landscapes at pilot sites that could serve as models for others, and they should publish their findings as appropriate.
- Foundations and granting agencies should refocus their philanthropy away from short-term program support to grants that assist sites in building their capacity to sustain themselves for the long term, including GOS and endowment.
- Foundations should be supported in their efforts to terminate repeated "drip support" to historic sites to focus their support on sites taking positive steps to achieve long-term sustainability.
- Those who educate and develop the leadership of historic sites should amend their curricula to better equip students to deal successfully with rapidly changing realities.
- The major professional associations should encourage, promote, publicize, and recognize experimental and successful models of change and sustainable practices.
- The profession must develop new measures, beyond attendance, that document the quality of visitor engagement at sites and the extent of community outreach beyond the bounds of the historic site.
- Historic sites must no longer think of the "velvet rope tour" as their basic "bread and butter" program and must generate more varied ways to utilize their remarkable resources to enrich people's lives.
- The historic site community must reaffirm the importance of these places for our nation's future and redefine their mission, in terms of that future rather than the past.
- Selected sites should develop a pilot process to streamline deaccessioning.