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Liza J. Schade, Portland State University, graduate student, “Finding a Community Niche: Rethinking Historic House Museums in Oregon”

Abstract: Historic homes in Oregon land on a wide spectrum of preservation, from the dilapidated, boarded-up building to the fully functioning interpretive site. There are four major factors affecting the success of projects in this state: level of preservation, board commitment and capacity, public interest and access, and funding issues. Based on original fieldwork, this paper will utilize the above factors to look at case studies in three counties in Oregon, and will conclude with analysis and recommendations for current Historic House Museum projects.

“Finding a Community Niche:
Rethinking Historic House Museums in Oregon”

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Historic house museums are interdisciplinary sites of public history and preservation, where visitors can have a tangible and "personal participation" with the past.[1] Once an old home is studied, preserved and curated into a museum, the structure can never again be totally original, but the goal is to provide as close to that experience as possible. Places of habitation not only inspire admiration for early architecture, lifeways and narratives, but they deepen understanding of historical context and influence heritage activism.

Imagining alternative uses, inviting interdisciplinary collaboration, increasing public input, and broadening context have all become fundamental to the sustainability of historic homes. A new preservation movement to "transition" the field of historic house museums to modern practice is currently in progress, inspired by the work of prior activists *and* current professionals.[2] There are four major factors affecting HHM projects: methodology, public access, board capacity and funding. This short paper discusses current graduate thesis work in public history, specifically related to reinterpretation and more equitable representation of approximately two thousand listed historic homes in Oregon. A decade of public history experience and research, along with two years of graduate fieldwork, have contributed to this thesis overview which will cover the history of preservation movements in the United States, discuss two specific case studies, and make recommendations for the future of the field.

Since the 1850s, four main waves of activism in historic preservation have swept through the United States. The country is in the midst of the fourth, where the focus is on implementing reinterpretation goals and improving public access. Preservationists have gone from elite patriotic saviors of grand architecture and the founding father narrative to agents of social change who must continually find ways to marry national and local heritage with the challenges of fast-paced modern development.

The first preservation movement was inspired by female grassroots activism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mount Vernon Ladies Association was the first to do this work, formed by Pamela Ann Cunningham in the 1850s, and the group focused on the preservation of George Washington's plantation. The MVLA would become an "early model for organizations involved in saving landmark structures" such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Ladies' Hermitage Association, both founded in the late 1880s.[3] Most of those female-led philanthropic groups would "emulate" the goals and standards of the MVLA, establishing programs and sites that would show patriotism and honor colonial ancestors.[4] Additionally, historian Andrew Hurley notes that after 1870 the "urban revitalization movement picked up momentum" as the Industrial Revolution threatened to demolish colonial buildings in favor of development due to population growth.[5]

The Antiquities Act of 1906 made identification and protection of natural sites a national priority, but colonial structures remained important. Professionalization in several different academic fields during the next few decades is not considered part of a movement, yet it did begin to organize public history and historic preservation into academic areas that could be managed and taught. The creation of historic districts trended in the 1930s in cities like New Orleans, Louisiana, as well as historical societies, with many groups preserving historic homes as their own headquarters. An overwhelmingly patronized and patriotic outlook, however, "encouraged historians to disconnect from present-day issues" and focus on aesthetics, mythology, and national prominence.[6]

The second preservation movement occurred in the wake of civil rights activism and fast urban development of the postwar 1950s. Professionals, philanthropists, and the private sector came together to pull the emergency brake, resulting in the National Historic Preservation Act

(NHPA) of 1966. Heritage preservation alongside progress became a major goal of the movement at this time because listing properties on the National Register would rescue them from disrepair or demolition, clean up neighborhoods, and promote business and tourism in developing areas.

Nevertheless, urban revitalization plans quickly became overshadowed by large scale development of highways, coliseums, and suburbs. Many preservationists did not foresee the amount of elitism and displacement that would dominate NHPA listing practices and politics, and even grassroots efforts to this day. Provisions of the NHPA proved to be successful in expanding the number of sites, but the program was often accused of being "too restrictive" about types, focusing only on architecture and prominent names.[7] There is no doubt that the act provided crucial heritage legislation and created standardized procedures, such as Section 106 compliance, but a more equitable representation of listings would become increasingly necessary over the latter half of the twentieth century.

By the 1990s, major national growth and changes in historical thinking inspired a third wave in preservation that focused on diversification and combating the "displacement of the poor from revitalizing urban districts."[8] New western historians such as Patricia Limerick and Ned Blackhawk began to call attention to an incomplete, biased, and mythological representation and perception of national history and identity. In agreement, preservationists and public historians also began pushing for a more contextual interpretation of HHMs, better methodologies and funding, as well as increased tax incentives for working and eligible sites.

This third movement led to a small amount of early millennial legislation, such as the Save America's Treasures Program of 1999, which aimed to provide grants and matching programs through collaborations between the National Park Service and the private sector.

Additionally, heritage tourism was promoted through the Preserve America Initiative of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, which guides NHPA policy and supports community outreach. In 2011, the National Treasures Program acknowledged the endangered nature of historic sites and hoped to provide "potential solutions to the threats they faced."[9] Their mission under the National Trust for Historic Preservation aims to raise funds, prevent demolition, fight legal cases and "reflect our past while enriching our future."[10] Experimentation with new national legislation was a response to preservation needs on a higher federal level, but there was also talk amongst professionals about how to interest more sponsorship opportunities at a local level, through businesses and nonprofits.

Historic preservation is undergoing a fourth movement now, where HHMs are working to clean out collections, research and reinterpret broader narratives, use properties in different ways and include communities as active decision-making participants. Old paradigms are being thrown out and alternative methods are being implemented, analyzed and revised, all based on lessons learned from past waves of preservation activism and experience. Trying new methods and involving the public are paramount, as well as having boards committed to compliance and state and federal programs working to provide more equitable grant support.

Kuri Gill, Grants Coordinator for Oregon's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), asserts that historic house museums must "find their own niche" within each diverse and modern community, in order to be free of competition with other museums and heritage organizations, foster active relationships with the local public and set themselves apart in funding applications.[11] Max Page, author of *Why Preservation Matters*, notes that it is no longer our "grandmother's preservation movement," that the need for impactful change and methodical implementation is at hand, and the National Register needs to keep up with the fast-paced

momentum.[12] The “digital revolution” of the last two decades has almost daily innovated the field too, by providing exponentially greater access to and ability to share information, less invasive methodologies, and usable applications in public education.[13]

Historic house museums land on a wide spectrum of preservation, from the dilapidated, boarded-up structure to the fully functioning interpretive site. Four highly interconnected issues affect how preservation projects can be successfully planned, implemented, and sustained at HHMs in Oregon. Those factors, which include both rewards and pitfalls, are methodology, public access, board capacity and funding.

Methodology refers to a full reinterpretation of an historic home, which includes evaluating a property, designing a strategic plan and implementing changes, with public comment and support every step of the way. Public access and engagement has always been at the “bottom of the barrel” of priorities in the past, but involving local residents is now at the forefront.[14] The goal is to renew public support, not only financially, but to increase active visitation to unique physical spaces and provide new modes of education. The last two factors, board capacity and funding, are highly intertwined and crucial to a working house museum. According to financial manager Rebekah Beaulieu, a proper board must be made of community members that can “offer professional insights” and be able to collaborate successfully on management, fundraising and programming.[15] Funding for house museums must increase and become more equitable in order to sustain the field indefinitely, which means fair opportunities for a more diverse set of sites.

Field work placed the above factors into perspective and while acknowledging that many other things may come into play, most challenges can be categorized together under those four in various interlaced ways. All historic homes have their own character and integrity and deserve

equitable treatment, which means that some factors may be deemed more important than others within each unique case. This incredible diversity of need, as well as the open-ended possibility of solutions, makes historic homes some of the most complicated museum environments to work in today. There are many dynamic issues to continually overcome, but the following two properties are good examples of the preservation movement currently going on in Oregon.

Hollinshead Park is located in northeast Bend, Oregon, just a few minutes from the Old Mill District. Beginning in the 1950s, Dean and Lily Hollinshead began reducing their large dairy farm and horse ranch. Supporting urban development, the couple planned to posthumously donate their last sixteen acres to the Bend Park and Recreation District (BPRD). The intent was to preserve the most precious portion of their homestead, provide a natural community space and educate the public about ranching and sharecropping history. Once acquired by BPRD in 1983, the full public park was developed, which now includes the original house, tack shed, outbuildings, community garden, off-leash dog areas and a popular event space in the rehabilitated barn. The house and tack shed are occasionally opened for summertime tours by retired local Sharron Rosengarth, who had lived in the house as a child with her sharecropper parents, James and Virginia Matson. Dedicated to preserving the history, Sharron and her now late husband, Tony Rosengarth, worked with BPRD to restore and stage the home in 1998.

Over the summers of 2019 and 2020, collections work was conducted at the house and tack shed under supervision of Kim Johnson with BPRD and the Director of Deschutes County Historical Society (DCHS), Kelly Cannon-Miller. Working under grant funds and a memo of understanding between the two organizations, a full inventory of the house and tack shed was compiled by myself, along with an oral history and digital assets about the history of house, restoration and use as an historic site. The ultimate goal of their project was to begin the long

process of collections preservation and reinterpretation into an active park space, which it has great potential to become in its year-round neighborhood location. The collaborative process will continue between DCHS and BPRD to reinterpret the site to be more contextual, as well as innovate sustainable public programming, to benefit both the park and historic site as a unified space.

Teamwork at all levels is crucial to the continued success of this ongoing reinterpretation project. The inventory done onsite was completed to standards using high resolution images and a transferrable cataloging system. The next step in planned methodology is accessioning and research, followed by public inquiry and planning on the restaging of the house and future uses. As noted, it will be key to work directly with the public to ensure a contextual narrative and contemporary use. When the time comes, a strategic plan is needed to determine how to work the house into regular park visitation and provide educational programs and events. One idea is for BPRD to take part of the proceeds from barn rentals to fund future staff and/or programs, while DCHS cares for collections, curates each room, trains any staff and volunteers, applies for supplemental funding and other museum related activities. Board capacity and funding are both important to the future of the site, but not as problematic to Hollinshead Park as to other sites. Both organizations have established boards and the reputative skills to apply for adequate funding. The major takeaway is that their open collaboration and relationship building exemplifies a new model of how sites can be reinterpreted with a unified effort.

The Stevens Crawford Heritage House is located in the historic district of Oregon City, two blocks from the famous McLoughlin home and right behind the old fire station. The beautifully maintained structure is an American Foursquare style built in 1908 for Harley Stevens and Mary Elizabeth Crawford-Stevens. Their daughter Mertie Stevens inherited the

home and then donated it to the Clackamas County Historical Society (CCHS) upon her own passing in 1968.[16] Within two years, the society cleaned out much of the house, sold many items to membership and held yard sales, then staged the house as a museum. Over the years to come, CCHS would grow while the house remained open to the public two days a week, but continued to remain a "static" artifact, increasingly losing its once prominent place in contemporary life.[17]

Awarded grant funding in 2018, museum staff began to reinterpret the house to be more contextual to the Edwardian era and closer to how the Stevens family actually lived. The first step for collections manager Johna Heintz, along with volunteers and Portland State interns like myself, was to clean out the home and determine what actually belonged to the family versus objects given by community members to Mertie Stevens (or later to the society). The team cleaned out and reorganized the basement and attic of the house, installed new storage shelving, repainted interiors with historic colors, moved the clothing collection to main storage, researched the house and family history and recurated the main floor. Digital projects with a PSU public history class under Professor Katrine Barber were also completed, as well as archival research into house history and museum board minutes for current thesis work.

Museum staff have done an exceptional job with their initial methodology, working with collections and reorganizing the home to look cleaner, more contextual and open to new uses. They have thought deeply about narrative, correcting the wrong time period and broadening perspectives from a patronized view to one that shows the whole family.[18] They are also tackling sensitive topics, like how to properly educate people about a collection of indgenous projectile points gathered by Harley Stevens, while making sure to give deserved respect to tribal culture in Oregon. There are several opportunities to be had in the future, such as collaboration with other sites in that historic district to create shared programming and possibly even reciprocate funds

and information. The sustainability of this HHM will be entirely dependent on public interest and funding, which is why it is so important to have a strategic plan that works with the local district to push that agenda forward.

The CCHS board took on this historic home at the exact time the NHPA legislation and procedures became a reality and it has continued to care for it as an house museum for five decades now. Funding has always been a problem, but selling the property to keep the larger museum afloat has only been guiltily thought of as a last resort. Thankfully this has not happened and grant funds were useful in beginning the reinterpretation process in recent years. Nevertheless, much more support will be needed to maintain the property as a sustainable house museum, which may have to come sooner rather than later, due to Covid and major loss of visitation and revenue.

Due to the incredibly varied and interdisciplinary nature of historic house museums, this very short report can only barely touch on the details of activism and legislation that brought the field to the present movement. The larger argument of my thesis is that house museums are actively responding to and implementing new preservation techniques and technologies, that a few case studies in Oregon are becoming early models for reinterpretation, and that a more equitable representation of historic homes is needed nationwide. Re-interpretive methodologies are dynamic and HHM professionals will need to keep up, especially with digital resources making it faster to access and share information. Interdisciplinary collaboration and public engagement are absolutely crucial priorities for reinterpretation projects to be successful. Active educational programming is being innovated to connect people to the history of each site and renew interest and support.

Boards need to be closely involved with their organizations, providing professional expertise and networking opportunities, as well as continuously fundraising and complying with preservation standards. Funding is perhaps the most difficult thing to procure, which is why federal and state governments need to make more available for application and be less elitist with awards. Preserving heritage is extremely important for ensuring continuity of the past into the future, but always challenging to accomplish. The vast array of issues can become overwhelming, but it is truly an exciting and inspiring time of movement in this versatile field, which is why historians and preservationists are all the more in need of support.

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[1] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105
[2] Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy, eds., *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 3.
[3] Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Homes* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 9.
[4] Barbara Howe, "Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham," *Public Historian* 12, no. 1 (winter 1990), 35.
[5] Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 3.
[6] Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik, eds., *What is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 146.
[7] Max Page and Marla R. Miller, eds., *Bending the Future: 50 Ideas for the Next 50 Years of Historic Preservation in the United States* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 232.
[8] Page and Miller, eds., *Bending the Future*, 189.
[9] Norman Tyler, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to its History, Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 65.
[10] NTHP website for National Treasures: https://savingplaces.org/national-treasures
[11] Quotation from telephone interview with grants coordinator Kuri Gill, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, May 2020, used here with permission.
[12] Max Page, *Why Preservation Matters* (Yale University Press, 2016), 8.
[13] Douglas A. Boyd and Mary Larson, eds., *Oral History and the Digital Humanities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 5.
[14] Deborah Ryan and Frank Vagnone, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums: A Ground-Breaking Manifesto* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2016), 19.
[15] Rebekah Beaulieu, *Financial Fundamentals for Historic House Museums* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 35.
[16] Clackamas County Historical Society was renamed Museum of the Oregon Territory (MOOT) in the 1980s, with their main museum location above the Willamette Falls. CCHS is used here for those early years and MOOT for current work, but they are one and the same organization.
[17] Ryan and Vagnone, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 145.

[18] Medorum Crawford was a prominent Oregon trail guide and Oregon City pioneer, and the father of Elizabeth Crawford Stevens.

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