

## **Chasing Authenticity: Re-Examining the Authentic Experience in Historic House Museums**

In 1874, Ann Pamela Cunningham, the founder of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) and the mother of the American historic house museum, made her final address to the MVLA. Recognizing Mount Vernon's legacy both as the home of George Washington and the first historic house museum in the United States, Cunningham urged, "Let no irreverent hand change it; no vandal hands desecrate it with the fingers of progress... Upon you rests this duty." Cunningham hoped that by staving off the effects of time, the MVLA could preserve an authentic snapshot of America's past, and by extension, its heritage.<sup>1</sup> With those words, Cunningham set the standard for the thousands of historic house museums that would follow in Mount Vernon's footsteps. But by leading the crusade against change, she also doomed the historic house museum to the fate of the dusty time capsule: stagnant, inflexible, and inevitably, irrelevant.

In today's world, that fate has come to pass for many historic house museums. Museum staff clings to the traditional model of the period furnished room, because it has been deemed "authentic history," but they wonder why visitation is declining. What historic house museums need is the opposite of what Ann Pamela Cunningham prescribed—they need to be open to change. More specifically, historic house museums need to be open to a model of interpretation that is less stringent. This includes a more fluid definition of authenticity, one that embraces not only a house's objects, but emphasizes the true strength of any historic house—its place and its stories. Drayton Hall and President Lincoln's Cottage are two museums that are leading the charge in such efforts, and demonstrating that pushing the limits of what we consider authentic

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick H. Butler III, "Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community," in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 22.

can be thought provoking and transformative for visitors. Museum professionals and visitors alike must engage in this conversation about authenticity in order to break down the barrier between what visitors expect from an authentic experience, and what museums can realistically deliver.

While it is difficult to nail down the exact number of historic house museums in the United States, it is generally accepted that almost every community in the country has at least one. Historic house museums face unique challenges because of their dual nature as places of preservation and public education. Unlike most museum institutions, located in modern buildings, part of what a historic house museum displays is the building itself. Furthermore, those buildings are old, often requiring retrofitting or restoration, and in the long term requiring constant upkeep. As a result, a successful historic house museum must “support both the maintenance needs of its building and that of the collections within, keeping both house and objects in trust for the public benefit.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the small, localized nature of historic house museums result in smaller endowments, more limited contributions from donors and decreased likelihood of corporate sponsorship. This means that the financial burden of preservation is compounded by financial needs concerning exhibitions, staffing, and marketing.<sup>3</sup>

As if these challenges were not enough, in recent years historic house museums have come under criticism for being too similar, both in their scope and interpretation. Without an up to date statistic as to the number of house museums in the United States, it is impossible to calculate the percentage of those museums that follow the traditional, period furnished model as exemplified by Mount Vernon. However, it is generally known that most historic house

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<sup>2</sup> Dina Kanawati, “Founding or Funding: Are Historic house Museums in Trouble?” (Master’s Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Susan R. Orr, “Historic House Museum Sustainability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Paths to Preservation” (Master’s Thesis, Seton Hall University, 2010), 12.

museums do follow that model. This means that part of the problem for historic house museums is that they are too much alike, and historic house museum interpretation has become “boring” and “antiquated.”<sup>4</sup> This ultimately leads to a mentality among potential visitors that if you have seen one historic house museum, you have seen them all, which contributes to declining visitation.

Period furnished rooms have always been the way that historic house museums have done things, but as argued by Robert Janes, that is not a good enough reason to keeping doing it that way. In the struggle for sustainability, Janes argues that it is “time for museums to examine their core assumptions.”<sup>5</sup> For historic house museums, the prevailing assumption has always been that the best way to present authentic history is with period decorated rooms, velvet ropes, and docent-guided tours. To challenge this assumption means looking for new ways to give visitors an authentic experience. This argument is echoed by Patrick H. Butler, who states that historic house museums “must consider interpretive strategies other than the classic decorative arts interior” because teaching history through furnishings “may no longer be sufficient.”<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that the traditional model should be done away with all together—there are many historic house museums that do it extremely well—it simply means diversifying the options.

### **Defining Authenticity**

Before considering how to challenge these assumptions about authenticity, it is necessary to consider what the traditional assumptions are. For decades, tourism scholars have been arguing about authenticity, both what it means and how to achieve it. The earliest understandings of authenticity operated in a true-false binary, in which something that was

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Moe, “Are There Too Many House Museums?” *Forum Journal* 16, no. 3 (2002): 7-8; Cary Carson, “The End of Historic House Museums: What’s Plan B?” *The Public Historian* 30 (2008): 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance, or Collapse?* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 49.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 36, 23.

defined as authentic was associated with truth and accuracy, whereas the inauthentic fell on the other side of the spectrum, denoting the false or the artificial. Supporting this thought process was the assertion of an “absolute, autonomous reality,” against which authenticity could be tested.<sup>7</sup> Ning Wang argues that this understanding of authenticity has been traditionally linked with museums, in which the museum (through the judgment of its curators) holds the authority to deem something authentic or inauthentic. Furthermore, Gordon Waitt asserts that museum visitors typically hold this true-false binary as the basis for their understanding of the authentic.<sup>8</sup>

This museum-linked concept of authenticity, in which the museum not only has the power to judge authenticity, but also in and of itself is inherently authentic, is traditionally tied to objects. Wang refers to this as “objective authenticity” in which the toured objects hold the power, and are perceived by visitors to be authentic. Understanding authenticity is further complicated by what Wang calls constructive authenticity, and what other scholars have referred to as “staged authenticity,” in which a situation is constructed in order to exude the authentic.<sup>9</sup> According to this framework, historic house museums working under the traditional model fall under both of these categories. The objects and the furniture may be authentic in that they were owned by the people the museum is interpreting, but the period room in which the objects and furniture are placed, were most likely constructed or “staged” by museum staff. Therefore, even the traditional model of historic house museums challenges the simplicity of the true-false binary, even if visitors do not realize it.

Edward M. Bruner provides perhaps the most useful framework for understanding authenticity at historic sites by succinctly separating authenticity into four categories. First, there

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon Waitt, “Consuming Heritage: Perceived Historical Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 27, no. 4 (2000): 846.

<sup>8</sup> Ning Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, no. 2 (1999): 350-351; Waitt, “Consuming Heritage,” 846.

<sup>9</sup> Wang, “Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience,” 351.

is authenticity meaning “credible and convincing,” something that visitors can experience and easily believe to be an accurate representation of the past. Second, there is the perfect reproduction, which is authentic in the sense that it achieves “complete and immaculate simulation” of the original. According to Bruner, museum professionals most commonly use the first definition, and sometimes the second. Third, there is the authentic original, as opposed to the copy, but as Bruner points out, this definition implies that no reproduction could ever be considered authentic by comparison. This is closest to what Wang and Waitt define as the traditional understanding of an absolute truth of authenticity, and most closely describes visitor expectations from an authentic experience at a museum. Lastly, there is authenticity that has been “authorized, certified, or legally validated” by an entity of power, whether that be the federal government or other administrative body in charge of the historic site.<sup>10</sup> Realistically, most historic house museums fall into several of these categories simultaneously. This demonstrates that authenticity can be multi-dimensional, and that defining a historic site or historic house museum as authentic is not as simple as a true-false binary.

Bruner’s work alludes to the kinds of conversations that modern historians, historic preservationists and museum professionals have regularly about authenticity. Historical scholarship, which ideally informs all historic house interpretation, changes as new discoveries are made and new approaches develop. Historic preservationists are constantly embroiled in a balancing act between what is feasible, and what is historically accurate, when attempting to save and take care of historic buildings. Museum professionals are involved in a balancing act of their own, between protecting the objects they hold in the public trust, and delivering an accessible, thought provoking, and diverse experience for visitors. These are all difficult tasks,

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<sup>10</sup> Edward M. Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 2 (1994): 399-400.

and that difficulty is compounded by the struggle to present and maintain authenticity.

Authenticity is a moving target, and with their professional knowledge to guide them, historians, historic preservationists, and museum professionals have much different understandings of authenticity (and what is realistic when trying to achieve it) than visitors do.

### **Visitor Expectations of the Authentic**

The work of Bruner, Wang, and Waitt reveal that the concept of authenticity is significantly more complicated than most people might realize. However, visitors continue to use “authentic” as a blanket term for what they look for in a visit to a historic site or historic house museum. In their study of what visitors want from historic sites, Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood surveyed 255 visitors to a historic site in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Cameron and Gatewood found that the answers typically fell into two categories: desires related to content and desires related to physical layout and/or amenities. In the content category, people rated a desire for “authenticity” or “accuracy” high, along with an “informative presentation.” When asked what they meant by “authentic” many respondents identified costumed interpreters and period furniture as necessary for an authentic experience.<sup>11</sup> The specific mention of period furniture and costumed interpreters is not a coincidence. These visitors are describing the traditional historic house museum model—the Mount Vernon model—because that is what they have been taught to expect, and as a result have come to associate with authenticity.

Cameron and Gatewood also asked visitors to Bethlehem what they were hoping to get out of their visit, or what they were hoping to “take away” from the experience. Other than “information” or “knowledge,” “a personal connection to history or people of the past” was the most common answer. Cameron and Gatewood categorized this discussion of a personal

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine M. Cameron and John B. Gatewood, “Excursions into the Un-Remembered Past: What People Want From Visits to Historic Sites,” *The Public Historian* 22 (2000): 114-116.

connection as being completely separate from the authenticity discussion, but the two are undeniably related. One visitor made the association, explaining that when trying to feel a connection to the past, he wanted “the real thing, no reconstructions.” This visitor is identifying Bruner’s third definition of authenticity, in which a reproduction simply cannot hold up to an authentic original. Other participants made similar connections, just less explicitly. For example, one visitor wanted to “feel the experience of the people of that time, what they were thinking, what their reality was.” Another mentioned wanting to get the “feeling of the place” as a way to “connect with what was.” Finally, one visitor said they wanted to feel the “aura of the period” and use their “mind to experience it, not just the externals.”<sup>12</sup> What these visitors are expressing is not just a desire for a *personal* connection, but an *authentic* connection, a deeper authenticity—one that goes beyond the period furniture and the costumed interpreters mentioned by other visitors.

### **Authentic Places, Authentic Stories**

There are several aspects of a historic house museum that contribute to its authenticity. In most historic house museums, three factors—objects, place, and stories—work together to create an overall authentic experience for visitors. Yet, as illustrated by the study by Cameron and Gatewood, while visitors are clear they want an authentic experience as it pertains to objects, they tend to be less explicit about the importance of place or stories. Instead, they simply express a desire to “connect” with the past. It is worthwhile, then, to explore the importance of place and stories when it comes to interpreting historic houses and creating an authentic experience.

Place refers not just to the historic house’s location, though that is certainly a factor, but more so its *sense* of place. What ultimately distinguishes historic house museums from their

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<sup>12</sup> Cameron and Gatewood, “Excursions into the Un-Remembered Past,” 117-118.

purpose built counterparts is that visitors can learn about history where it actually happened. In that sense, historic sites or house museums have unusually strong senses of place. There are two main ways of thinking about this sense of place as it serves interpretation. The first imagines the house or its grounds as a stage, but as Butler points out, “the stage need not be fully furnished.”<sup>13</sup> Through this lens, the house serves as the authentic setting for a discussion about the house’s history. The second way to think about place actually situates the house in a framework that visitors can easily recognize—the house as the object. The house itself truly is a big object, one that must be conserved, researched, and interpreted for the visitor. Regardless of how place is understood, it provides a major basis for authenticity at any historic house museum. It is important to remember that most historic house museums were founded as part of a preservation effort to save a *place*. A historic house cannot be divorced from its sense of place, and so place cannot be divorced from a discussion of authenticity.

If a historic house’s sense of place provides the stage for the authentic experience, the stories of that site are the play being acted out through the interpretation. Stories are in fact the bread and butter of any historic house museum—stories create the connection to the people who lived there and the events that took place there, which is what fuels the interpretation and in large part attracts visitors. Good stories provide the human element in every historic house museum, but they in large part are also the basis for the educational element of those museums. As a result, good stories not only “provoke thought and appeal to a wide range of interests,” they are also based on sound historical scholarship. Historical scholarship changes, however, when new discoveries are made. So in order for interpretation at historic houses to be authentic, the stories

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, “Past, Present, and Future,” 37.



being told as a part of that interpretation must change right along with the scholarship when necessary.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps place and storytelling simply get taken for granted and therefore left out of the conversation about authenticity. If that is the case, it is time for museums to redirect that conversation. There are two historic house museums that are leading that discussion, and bringing place and storytelling back into the spotlight. Drayton Hall and President Lincoln's Cottage have been chosen as examples here due to their unique philosophy of interpretation. Both sites are the opposite of the traditional historic house museum in that neither of them is traditionally furnished, and therefore objects do not drive their interpretation. Instead, the museums let their sense of place and storytelling drive the authentic experience they create for visitors. Additionally, both museums have managed to shake off the fear of change that has come to define most historic house museums—rather, both of these sites embrace it. Lastly, both sites are spearheading innovative efforts about how to talk to visitors about historical scholarship, interpretation and authenticity.

### **Drayton Hall, Charleston, South Carolina**

Drayton Hall is a Georgian Palladian style plantation home located fifteen miles outside of Charleston, South Carolina. The house was constructed in the 1730's and was the home of seven generations of Draytons before being sold to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1974. Today, the house is one of the only surviving examples of its architecture and the only plantation on the Ashley River to survive intact. The house is interpreted as a "survivor" of the many events it has witnessed, including the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, natural disasters, as well as urban sprawl. Additionally, the house's interpretation does not just address the

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<sup>14</sup> Rex M. Ellis, "Interpreting the Whole House," in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly (New York: Altamira Press, 2002), 63, 77.

Draytons, but also the African Americans who lived and worked on the property for decades. Drayton Hall is not furnished and has few objects on display, and the house, though preserved and taken care of, has not been restored to a specific time period. Instead, Drayton Hall is interpreted as “an artifact that showcases time and layers of history rather than reflecting a singular period of grandeur.”<sup>15</sup>

Drayton Hall is a prime example of how a strong sense of place can drive a historic site’s interpretation. Drayton Hall is interpreted as “more than a house, it’s a staging ground,” a place where history has played out for centuries, and continues to do so today. As an architectural jewel in near original condition, the house is truly the front and center of the site’s tours. The house has not been restored or tampered with in any way, preserving authenticity in the purest sense of the word. Drayton Hall embraces the idea that the historic house serves as an object, and so historical interpreters point out features of the house as well as tell stories about its inhabitants. For example, the original marble mantelpiece in the upper great hall features the Drayton family crest and motto, acting as a talking point about the family. And in the withdrawing room, intricate details of imported decorative swags above the windows attest not only to the Drayton family’s wealth and prominence, but also to John Drayton’s attention to detail. The grounds of Drayton Hall serve a similar purpose. Instead of restoring or recreating the grounds as they looked during one time period, preservation efforts have created a “layered landscape” that presents visitors with authentic elements from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Without furniture and objects to reflect a “singular period of grandeur,” Drayton Hall’s interpretation is free to tell the stories of several generations of inhabitants, instead of just one or

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<sup>15</sup> “Introduction,” Drayton Hall, accessed February 8, 2014, <http://www.draytonhall.org/overview/introduction.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Introduction;” “Online Tour,” Drayton Hall, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.spinatour.com/draytonhall4/tour.html>; “Preserving a Historical Landscape: A Balanced Approach,” Drayton Hall, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.draytonhall.org/preservation/grounds/>.

two. In addition to Drayton Hall's beautiful and unique architecture, the stories of the house's inhabitants provide an authentic connection to times gone by as they "reveal who we are and where we've come from." Including all of these people and perspectives provides visitors with "a unique way to experience history, placing them in a fluid timeline that shows change and continuity through three centuries of American history." In this sense, Drayton Hall does not shy away from change, but celebrates the changes that have happened during the house's 270 year existence.<sup>17</sup> This is a much more authentic way for visitors to experience history because it acknowledges the way the study of history actually works, and provides visitors with a more complete history of the site, instead of just a snapshot.

### **President Lincoln's Cottage, Washington, District of Columbia**

President Lincoln's Cottage (PLC) is located on the grounds of the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington D.C., three miles north of the White House, and served as the summer retreat of Abraham Lincoln during a full quarter of his presidency. While there, Lincoln thought through his ideas and made decisions that ultimately shaped the course of the Civil War, most notably by drafting the Emancipation Proclamation. Today, President Lincoln's Cottage is a steward site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and has been opened to the public since 2008. Like Drayton Hall, PLC is not furnished in the traditional model and does not focus on objects as part of its interpretation. PLC further diverges from the traditional historic house museum by featuring technology prominently in its interpretation. Sound clips of recorded

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<sup>17</sup> "Introduction;" Mame McCully, "Drayton Hall: A Three Century Tour," *Preservation Nation Blog*, August 24, 2013, <http://blog.preservationnation.org/2013/08/24/sitings-drayton-hall/#.Uv6uhrRnjhc>.

primary sources and televisions displaying historical images and documents serve as a major component of the visitor experience.<sup>18</sup>

When developing the interpretation for PLC, project participants wanted a truly “transformative” experience for visitors. However, PLC was lacking one of the defining characteristics of what visitors typically consider an authentic experience: objects and furniture. The developers did not have access to any of the original furniture, so rather than fill the museum with inauthentic objects; they chose instead to focus on the authentic place and stories. This harkens back to the work of Bruner, who draws a distinction between “exact” reproductions, and true, authentic originals. The question for PLC was, is it more authentic to fill the house with reproductions, or to focus instead on what can be deemed truly authentic, the stories and the environment in which they took place? For the developers of President Lincoln’s Cottage, the latter seemed an obvious choice.<sup>19</sup>

Conversations about the use of the traditional furnished model were further complicated by the nature of the historical sources available. There was very little definitive information about the Lincoln furnishings and how they were arranged in the cottage, and no interior photographs from the Lincoln era exist. Current director of PLC, Erin Carlson-Mast, admits that following the traditional furnished model at PLC would have involved a “great deal of conjecture.” This was a major concern for almost everyone involved with the project. There was a strong desire amongst the developers to avoid putting visitors in a situation where they

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<sup>18</sup> Erin Carlson-Mast, “Furnished with Ideas: A New Model of Historic House Interpretation,” in *Museums of Ideas: Commitment and Conflict, A Collection of Essays* (Colophon, 2011), 199-203; “History,” President Lincoln’s Cottage, accessed February 8, 2014, <http://lincolncottage.org/category/explore/history/>.

<sup>19</sup> Carlson-Mast, “Furnished with Ideas,” 204-205.

could get distracted by a bunch of inauthentic furniture, and therefore lose sight of the real authenticity of the experience—the house itself and the stories about it.<sup>20</sup>

Like Drayton Hall, the Cottage and its physical environment, or its sense of place, is a major component of the visitor experience. A major argument against fully furnishing the Cottage with reproductions was a “strong desire not to overshadow an authentic place.” Much of what makes PLC historically significant in the first place is what it meant to President Lincoln and his family as a retreat from presidential pressures. As a result, the idea of the Cottage as a “sanctuary” became a major theme of PLC’s interpretive plan. A tour includes several references to features of the grounds, including the Soldiers Home National Cemetery and the view shed of downtown Washington D.C., which helps visitors understand how those views impacted Lincoln’s experience there.<sup>21</sup> The Cottage is unique in the amount of surviving structural material, and so it has been successfully preserved and restored to its appearance during the Lincoln era. Although the grounds have been altered significantly over time, the seclusion afforded by PLC’s location on the grounds of the Armed Forces Retirement Home provides visitors with a very authentic sense of the bucolic, pastoral experience the Lincolns had while living there.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, the Cottage does act as a stage on which visitors and museum staff can talk about and experience history.

Without the focus on furnishings and objects, PLC is envisioned as a “museum of ideas” rather than a “museum of things.” Using the words of President Lincoln and the words of people who knew him and discussed his ideas with him, the interpretation seeks to unpack Lincoln’s ideas while showcasing the environment that provided the backdrop for his decision making.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 205-206.

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Ciulla et al., “Interpretive Plan,” Lincoln Cottage at the President Lincoln and Soldiers’ Home National Monument, Washington D.C., September 21, 2005, 15, 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Carlson-Mast, 205, 207.

Research into the Lincolns' time at the Cottage revealed a wide range of thought provoking and dynamic stories that get to the heart of not only the family's experiences, but also the evolution of Lincoln's ideas about slavery and the Civil War. These primary sources and the stories they tell have become the driving force for PLC's interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

To further move away from the traditional historic house model, PLC developers sought a way to present these authentic stories to visitors in a more dynamic way. Technology ended up being the best way to achieve this, because it allowed developers to bring primary documents directly to the viewer without having to put the original documents on display or have a docent recite them. When documents are put on display, only a few visitors at a time can crowd around them, and they are usually difficult read. The technology at PLC magnifies images of the documents and plays them on a video screen or plays recorded excerpts of those documents, allowing them to be directly integrated into the interpretation and allowing larger groups of visitors to experience them simultaneously. Additionally, using recordings of primary sources read by actors allows visitors to immerse themselves more deeply into the experience and feel a stronger connection to the people of the past.<sup>24</sup>

Visitors tend to be very receptive to this new interpretive paradigm and appreciate the focus on President Lincoln's ideas and the stories of what happened at the Cottage, rather than on objects that were not even used by the Lincolns in the first place. In early evaluations and focus groups done at PLC, many visitors expected furniture (and were therefore surprised by the lack of it) and some were initially off-put by the inclusion of technology. Erin Carlson-Mast writes that this is not surprising because it is what visitors have come to expect from the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 203, 205, 206.

<sup>24</sup> Ciulla et al., "Interpretive Plan," 15.

traditional historic house model.<sup>25</sup> Visitors will continue to expect this traditional type of experience from historic house museums, unless historic house museums challenge those expectations and provide visitors with something different. Overall positive reactions from visitors at PLC, as well as Drayton Hall, suggest that a reframing of what it means to be “authentic” could be the key to historic house museums’ revitalization.

The question remains, then, about how historic house museums across the country can begin to reshape the way they frame and deliver an authentic experience to their visitors. According to Callie Hawkins, Associate Director for Programs at President Lincoln’s Cottage, it starts with a conversation. “Visitors think that the only way to experience history is through period furnished rooms, because that is what they have been taught to expect,” she says. “I think challenging those expectations by providing an alternative is the first step, and then being upfront and open with your visitors about why you made the interpretive decisions that you did is key.” Michelle Martz, a historical interpreter at PLC, agrees. “I have found that when I engage with visitors about the way historical preservation and historical scholarship works, and how that informs the interpretive decisions we make, they are receptive more often than not,” she says.<sup>26</sup> It is up to museum professionals to get these conversations started with their visitors and to begin breaking down these expectations about authenticity in order to pave the way for innovation and change at historic house museums.

The greatest benefit of the kind of models being used by Drayton Hall and President Lincoln’s Cottage is the possibility for adaptation and change. Furnishings and objects, while presenting certain opportunities for interpretation, also present limitations. The chief among them being that the furnished room acts as a snapshot or time capsule of a singular period in

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<sup>25</sup> Carlson-Mast, “Furnished with Ideas,” 208, 214-216.

<sup>26</sup> Callie Hawkins and Michelle Martz, interview by author. Washington D.C., February 15, 2014.

time. Most historic house museums have long and diverse histories, however, and committing to a furnishing plan forces developers to exclude certain stories or interpretations. These limitations are simply not present in a historic house that is not boxed in by a furnishing plan. As historical scholarship about Drayton Hall and President Lincoln's Cottage changes and evolves, so too can the interpretation. Not only does this mean that visitors are more likely to get up to date information, it also means that the sites themselves will have the ability to adapt and change through time, hopefully avoiding the irrelevancy from which so many historic house museums suffer. The possibilities really are endless, and in the future, many historic house museums struggling to attract visitors may also choose to break away from tradition in their pursuit of authenticity.

Historic house museums are historical treasures that provide visitors with unique views of the past. Ann Pamela Cunningham charged the members of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association with saving historic house museums from change. Those women and their thousands of successors took that charge very seriously, and as a result the majority of historic house museums in the United States are extremely similar. So unlike their predecessors, if today's museum professionals want to continue to save our nation's historic houses, they must be open change. Authenticity has always been and should continue to be a driving force behind visitor experiences at historic houses, but re-examining the means of achieving that authenticity can lead to innovation that will revitalize historic house museums. Museums like Drayton Hall and President Lincoln's Cottage demonstrate that historic house museums no longer need to be boxed in by the traditional model of period furnished rooms. Instead, as they chase that illusive ideal of authenticity, historic house museums can embrace what truly makes them unique in their own right—their sense of place and their stories.



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