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An Interview with Susan Wissler, Executive Director, The Mount on Surviving Debt and the Future of Historic Sites

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*Julian Fellowes and Susan Wissler at The Mount.
Credit: Lee Everett*

Over the past decade, the Mount—Edith Wharton’s home in Lenox, Massachusetts—has become a high-profile example of the challenges facing historic sites and house museums as its financial struggles have been widely reported and watched from across the cultural arts world. The property where Wharton wrote many of her most famous works and experimented with her ideas about architectural and landscape design is designated as a National Historic Landmark and has been operated by the nonprofit Edith Wharton Restoration since the early 1980s. As the organization has worked to find a sustainable operating model for the site, it has engaged with many of the issues that similar institutions face, including the drain of significant deferred

maintenance costs for its historic buildings, a perceived disconnection from its surrounding community and the ongoing search for an inspiring vision to sustain the site in ways that are also resonant with its history.

The National Trust's relationship with the Mount began in 1980, when we purchased it with the Endangered Properties Fund and then resold it to Edith Wharton Restoration. We still hold the preservation easement on the property and its viewshed, and we are neighbors as well—one of our National Trust Historic Sites, Chesterwood, is located nearby in Stockbridge. We've been inspired as we've watched the Mount work to solve its financial problems while also developing new programming and partnerships that have yielded significant increases in visitation and brought a new vibrancy and comprehensive sustainability to the site. In fact, if the Mount is representative of the challenges faced by historic sites and house museums around the country, it is also depictive of the resiliency of these institutions and their potential to reimagine and reinvigorate themselves.

In late 2015 the Mount was back in the news with the exciting announcement that it had paid off the last of an \$8.5 million debt that included the cost of purchasing Wharton's personal library, which is now housed at the site. The repayment closed a chapter in what *The New York Times* called "a financial saga that might have come from the pages of a novel by its onetime owner." I asked Susan Wissler, the Mount's executive director since 2008, about the lessons learned from the institution's financial struggles, what's next for the Mount and how the continuing relevance of Wharton's writing influences the Mount today.

First of all, congratulations! What was the reaction to the news that the Mount had paid off its debt? And how did you and the board and staff celebrate?

You mean other than a big sigh of relief? Actually, the response was astounding; in the 48 hours following the *New York Times* report, we received literally hundreds and hundreds of emails and phone calls from across the country. We heard from our community, supporters from practically all 50 states, past board members, as well as partner organizations like the Trust. The congratulations were a huge confirmation that the work we are doing here at the Mount matters and that people really care and are rooting for us to succeed.

Five months later, the celebratory mood continues even though, frankly, our day-to-day realities haven't changed all that much. We still need to raise considerable funds for general operating and capital maintenance projects (we don't yet have an endowment), and we need to remain flexible and entrepreneurial as we look for new ways to engage our visitors and community. But, having said that, there is no question that we can now plan for our future in a way that just wasn't possible under the looming shadow of our debt.

I noticed that one of the ways you celebrated was with free admission for all Berkshire County residents in October. Why was it important to include the surrounding community in your celebrations?

Our community has played a huge role in our return to relevancy and the month-long welcome was our way of thanking them and acknowledging their support.

Back in 2008, when we nearly closed our doors, we re-examined our priorities and recognized the importance of building closer connections with our local community. We started offering programs—readings, lectures, music and theater—throughout the year so there were compelling reasons for local residents to come back to the Mount again and again.



Visitors enjoy The Mount's Terrace and Gardens. | Credit: The Mount

Our efforts have paid off—we now have a robust membership program that we can count on year after year and approximately half of our annual attendance is comprised of Berkshire residents. Return visitation has deepened our relationships and created a much stronger base of support.

What are the broader lessons you learned from this long process? Was there a moment when you doubted that you could do it? Was there a moment when you knew you were going to succeed?

It has been a long process! Before diving in, I want to acknowledge the dedication of my board and their determination to eliminate the debt. They were the driving force behind this initiative. Which leads me to one of the many lessons I have learned—having a committed and energized board is the most valuable asset any nonprofit could have, and I couldn't be more fortunate.

Second, it helps to be agile, because you don't know what's around the next corner. One of our greatest strengths as an organization has been the ability to quickly evaluate what is in front of us and make decisions in the moment. I don't mean to suggest that a strategic plan is not a valuable planning tool, but having the dexterity to course-correct in real time is critical to a small institution. This agility is what allowed us to pivot past obstacles and, if necessary, reverse course and redirect resources with minimal internal disruption or loss of opportunity.

Not necessarily doubt ... perhaps a good dose of despair, especially in the earliest days. I'll never forget the men in dark glasses and shiny suits who arrived unannounced to videotape the estate and tag and inventory the "collateral," nor what it felt like, with virtually no money in our account, to stare through the bare trees at Wharton's great home—white, massive, essentially marooned and completely silent. Luckily, I have been blessed with a wonderful board, a great staff and staunch supporters, all of whom stood by the Mount every step of the way.

A part of the Mount's debt came from an extensive restoration project. With the benefit of hindsight, what advice would you give to other organizations to prevent

preservation issues, especially deferred maintenance, from becoming existential threats?

Those of us who are responsible for the preservation and maintenance of a historic estate understand that the financial needs are great and never ending, and there is no question that it can be intimidating.

One of my biggest takeaways from this experience is, do not underestimate the importance of your community. As I mentioned, local community involvement has been one of our main priorities since 2008. In addition to creating reasons for the community to care and become involved in our work, we have increased our investment in both Lenox and the greater Berkshires region. We host local events like the high school prom, we serve on local boards, we buy locally and we are good neighbors.

It is important to build these relationships, because it's your community that will be there for you when you need them. In June 2014 we suffered devastating damage to our formal gardens due to a severe rainstorm. Thanks to the community, we were able to raise \$80,000 within two weeks and reopen the gardens for the Fourth of July weekend. This past year our boilers failed just as we were entering the colder months. Again, the community rallied and funds were raised. These outpourings of local support would not have been possible eight years ago.

One of the things that I appreciate about the Mount is that it continues to evolve—from the period when the site was being used by Shakespeare & Company to the extensive restoration of the house and gardens to the development of vibrant new partnerships and programming over the last few years. Most recently, you've started a writer-in-residence program and the *Stories She Loved* series, inspired by the books in Wharton's library. How do you strike a strategic balance between trying new things and remaining committed to a core mission?

Stephanie Meeks and the Trust have been on the forefront of acknowledging that, in order to preserve these great American properties, we need to think in new ways. We needed to be relevant and inviting if we were going to survive.

We re-examined how we were defining “accessibility” and started to implement changes. One of the very first things we did was to take down all the velvet ropes and stanchions, inviting visitors to enter the rooms, sit on the furniture, and experience the house as a guest of Wharton’s. That one small initiative was truly transformative. Visitors responded by staying longer and engaging with our interpretative staff on a much more personal level. It confirmed that one can be a good steward without being overly protective or stodgy.



A family snaps the perfect shot on The Mount’s Lime Walk. | Credit: John Seakwood

Our program model is really just another evolution of our determination to make accessibility a top priority. Today, we offer a diverse line-up of events that utilize and showcase the entire property—there’s music on the terrace, lectures in the stable, theater on the grounds. It has proven to be a successful model, allowing us to forge deeper and more intimate connections. While we will forever retain our identity as a prized national landmark, we have become so much more—we are truly a center for culture animated by Edith Wharton’s passions and achievements. This evolution has

been critical to our success—it’s what restores the “vibe” in vibrancy to Wharton’s home and allows us to thoroughly engage broader, more contemporary audiences.



Edith Wharton, 1905
Credit: Beinecke Library,
Yale University

For me, the Mount—like everything in the Berkshires—is about the landscape. The Mount has enchanting woodlands, beautiful gardens and spectacular vistas, many of which were designed or significantly influenced by Wharton herself. In fact, she wrote that she was “a better landscape gardener than a novelist.” With that kind of legacy, what is the role of the landscape in the future of the Mount? Is there a tension between preserving a historic landscape and allowing people to explore and enjoy it?

About four years ago we realized, with our programs and events, tours and rentals, we were maxing out the use of the house. That’s when we started to think and talk about the land as an underutilized asset—a sleeping giant, if you will. We began with small steps, adding a few walking paths and scattering benches throughout the grounds. We took that idea one step further in 2013, when we partnered with a local nonprofit, SculptureNow, on a large-scale sculpture show exhibited throughout the property. Visitors loved the juxtaposition of the contemporary works with the historic setting—the man-made forms against a natural backdrop. We now include the outdoor sculpture show as part of our annual programming.

The landscape will unquestionably continue to play a critical role in our future. Public access to beautiful, natural spaces is vital to communities. That is why we are purposefully exploring the creation of an extensive system of walking trails across our property as well as neighboring lands.

As good stewards, it is our responsibility to care for all the resources of the Mount and to provide accessibility to Wharton and her legacy—whether it’s the house and gardens she designed, the stories she wrote, or the vista she helped create. This is the next evolution of our mission.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the best-selling author of *Between the World and Me*, recently listed the *Age of Innocence* as one of his top 10 favorite books, writing of it in *The New York Times*, “The book is a defense of elitism, something I guess I oppose. But I found it credible, here.” Why does Edith Wharton continue to seem so credible and so contemporary? And does that inspire your work at the Mount?

It’s true, we all have our Google alerts set to pick up any Wharton references, and it’s amazing how often she is evoked. One reason Wharton’s writing is still credible is its authenticity; she was a keen observer not just of society but of the human condition. You can find contemporary counterparts of her characters in today’s literature because the qualities she imbued them with are universal. In addition, I do think there is something about this specific point in time, the “new” Gilded Age we are living in, that has brought about a renewed interest in her New York stories.

In many of the alerts we read, Wharton (or “Whartonian”) is used as shorthand to invoke style, character, place and time. “Wharton” has even become a verb! In a recent *New York Magazine* article, a socialite was described as spending most of her adult life Edith Wharton-ing her way through Manhattan’s upper crust. That pleased me to no end as it has long been one of my personal goals to see Edith Wharton used as a verb... that and eliminating the debt.

About Katherine Malone-France

Katherine Malone-France is the vice president for historic sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation.