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The great historic house museum debate

Do we have too many? The surprising fight over a quirky, dusty, and endangered American institution

By Ruth Graham

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Globe file photo - *The Mount, Edith Wharton's home in Lenox.*

BY MANY MEASURES, the museum world today seems sexier and more successful than ever. The Metropolitan Museum of Art [announced](#) in June that its annual attendance had topped 6 million for the third year in a row, its highest levels on record. In the Boston area, institutions including the Institute of Contemporary Art, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and the Peabody Essex Museum have opened sleek new additions or entirely new buildings designed by

big-name architects. The Museum of Fine Arts recently opened a glamorous new American wing to great fanfare.

Far outside this moneyed club lies the humbler community of small historic house museums. Located in former private homes, and often run by local historical societies and volunteers, the museums share a traditional template featuring a guided tour, antique furniture behind velvet ropes, and a small gift shop. Sometimes the original residents of these houses-turned-museums are still nationally or regionally famous—presidents, great artists, or titans of industry. But in many cases they were merely wealthy locals, or other citizens whose home just happened to survive long enough to become the oldest building in town. Whatever the original motivation for their preservation, historic house museums have become a ubiquitous feature of America's cultural landscape. The National Trust for Historic Preservation roughly estimates that there are more than 15,000 across the country—that's more than the number of McDonald's restaurants in America.

House museums can seem like the sleepest corner of the museum world: They tend to be small spaces with small budgets, elderly volunteers, and even older furnishings. But recently they have become the center of a live, even contentious debate. Although some well-known house museums are thriving, many smaller and more obscure places are struggling. Their plight is so drastic that some preservationists are now making an argument that sounds downright blasphemous to defenders of these charming repositories of local history: There are simply too many house museums, and many of them would be better off closing.

The argument has reached a surprisingly fevered pitch. Since the turn of the millennium, high-profile preservationists have published articles in scholarly journals and professional publications with incendiary titles like "Are There Too Many House Museums?" and "America Doesn't Need Another House Museum." They have held conferences and panel discussions on the so-called crisis with titles like "After the House Museum." Stephanie Meeks, the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is among the critics, even though her own organization maintains 20 house museums of its own. Turning old homes into museums has long been "the go-to preservation strategy," she said. "But there are only a handful I can think of that are really thriving with that model." Last fall, Meeks delivered a pointed keynote speech at the National Preservation Conference titled ["House Museums: A 20th-Century Paradigm,"](#) in which she argued that the traditional house museum model is often financially unsustainable and has been drastically overused, and preservationists must look beyond it. "The time for talk has ended," she announced, "and the time for action is upon us."



globe file photo - *Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury.*

But others parry that house museums—even the struggling ones—play an important role in the culture, and that the basic model isn't broken at all. "I feel deeply the opposite," said William Hosley, a Connecticut-based former museum director and current consultant who has become something of a firebrand on behalf of small historic house museums. "The future of not just tourism but our cultural heritage in general are these thousand points of light, these local communities that have some special thing, that have something deep and meaningful. Not every house museum is great, but I've never seen two alike." Creative new ideas for savings or repurposing imperiled house museums are beginning to proliferate. Meanwhile, this tranquil corner of the world has turned into a battleground over cultural homogeneity, public vs. private ownership of community resources, and the decline of public history in America.

MOUNT VERNON, a 21-room home on the banks of the Potomac River, was the longtime home of the country's first president, so it is fitting that it also became the country's first house museum. For history-museum professionals, the story is legendary: The house was falling into disrepair when a wealthy South Carolina woman, Ann Pamela Cunningham, and her newly assembled Mount Vernon Ladies' Association banded together to purchase and restore it in the 1850s. It remains the most popular historic estate in the country.

The Virginia mansion became the blueprint for thousands of its descendants all over the country, as state and local organizations began saving significant properties in a process critics call "museumification." The first wave of preservation focused on Revolutionary War sites. By the early 20th century, houses were being saved for their architectural interest, their famous former residents, or simply because it felt wrong to allow them to be demolished. The nation's bicentennial in 1976 launched a new outbreak of interest in local history; again, the default move was museum creation. "Every community in America in some way got interested in their history" in 1976, said Carl Nold, president and chief executive of the Boston-based "heritage organization" Historic New England.

The typical house museum invites visitors to imagine themselves as residents of a home at a particular moment (or moments) in history, and informs them about a slice of the country's past. Traditionally, it features a tour led by a volunteer docent, perhaps one wearing a period costume, leading visitors up tight staircases and down hallways and letting them peek into rooms featuring an arrangement of antique furnishings. House museums' vibrancy and professionalism may vary, but there's always a certain memorable magic to be found inside. At the very least, many of them tell a local story that might otherwise be forgotten.

A survey of existing local house museums illustrates just how profuse they are. In Massachusetts alone, you can tour the homes of Paul Revere, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, and Clara Barton, but also lesser-known lights like inventor Benjamin Thompson, ship-owner Jeremiah Lee, minister Benjamin Caryl, and 19th-century activist and author Edward Bellamy, best known for writing a utopian novel set in the year 2000. Some sites wind up competing with each other: In New Hampshire, there are two Franklin Pierce house museums less than 30 miles apart, run by two different organizations.

House museums face obvious problems like competition from rival museums and online distractions. Then there's the declining emphasis on history in public education. But the problem reaches beyond the classroom, and raises larger questions about contemporary cultural priorities. As Hosley points out, 20th-century philanthropists like Henry Ford and the Rockefeller family devoted millions of dollars to public history museums like Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg. When Calvin Coolidge left the presidency, he became president of the Council of the American Antiquarian Society. Today, the Gateses and Clintons of the world are more likely to invest in public health or STEM education—worthy causes, of course, but not ones that are about public history.



globe file photo - Willard House and Clock Museum in North Grafton.

In her speech last fall, Meeks called Mount Vernon “a beguiling exception, because it established and forever legitimized a model that just doesn't work very often.” Many house museums are run by small nonprofit organizations, staffed largely by volunteers, and boast minimal endowments. Some limp along on annual budgets as low as \$10,000, just enough to fix a leaky roof and pay

the bills for heat, electricity, and a security alarm. The National Trust for Historic Preservation survey found that more than half received no more than 5,000 visitors a year. In 2011, the organization produced a “Closedown Checklist” for historic house museums considering their options.

In New England, which [boasts more museums per capita](#) than any other region, and whose tourism brand is built around history, the problem is particularly pressing. “House museums in particular have a number of challenges, not least this great competition in New England because there are so many of them,” said Dan Yaeger, executive director of the New England Museum Association, which serves institutions and professionals in the region. “It’s a competition for resources.” The organization doesn’t keep track of house museums specifically, but more than half of its 486 institutional members are history museums, and 73 percent of those have annual budgets of less than \$250,000.

What’s the harm in letting a house museum limp along indefinitely, and even fail? Critics point out that this often means deferring critical maintenance that actually works against the aims of preservation, for one. But the larger issue is that if a house museum attracts only a trickle of visitors—some are open by appointment only—it isn’t serving its community as robustly as the building could in another capacity. Turning a historically significant property from a near-empty museum into a bustling community center isn’t a failure, they say, but a success.

The museums’ supporters protest that small historic house museums have something more special to offer than simply a space for community, if given the chance to survive. As museums, they often emphasize the intimate domestic stories of women and family life, frequently overshadowed by grander narratives in larger museums. The offbeat, sometimes haphazard nature of their collections also means they are a repository of the strange and diverse, the kinds of things that might slip through the cracks in more professionalized institutions. (Yaeger points out that these offbeat collections can become a burden, especially as baby boomers begin downsizing into smaller homes and turning over the contents of their attics to local historical societies.) They often serve small and remote communities that don’t have big sparkling art museums: A National Trust survey in 1988, the last major national survey of house museums anyone has conducted, found that 70 percent of all house museums are in rural locations or in places with populations under 50,000.

Hosley argues that if any region should treasure these resources, it’s New England. “The beauty in New England is we’ve got all this content right in our backyards. A lot of it is housed in and dependent on the survival of these local little historical societies and house museums,” he said. “They are the delivery system for the content that tells the story of our national history. It’s great to go to Bunker Hill and Independence Hall, but if that’s all Americans know about our history, they’re missing half of it.”

SOME ONCE-STRUGGLING house museums have found ways to stabilize their finances, and even to thrive. The Mount, Edith Wharton’s country home in Lenox, found itself on the brink of bankruptcy in 2008. Today, the museum is steadily climbing back to solvency, in part through

the kind of creative programming that draws repeat visitors. This month it is hosting “Touchstones at the Mount,” a series of Friday-evening conversations with well-known authors. “Our traditional visitation is holding steady, or maybe declining slightly,” said Susan Wissler, who took over as executive director in 2008. “It’s the programming that is bringing people to the property.”

Franklin Vagnone, executive director of the Historic House Trust of New York City, has delivered a lecture called “The Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums” all over the country in the last few years. In it, he argues that house museums need to do a better job of engaging with their local communities, by doing things like revitalizing their programming and telescoping out from a focus on one historic (often white) family. Vagnone calls it a “call to action” for the future of historic house museums: “I value them, I love them, but they’re not going to stick around unless we really do some drastic rethinking.”

Today, alternative models are discussed openly among professionals. In her 2007 book “New Solutions for House Museums,” preservation consultant Donna Ann Harris presented case studies describing eight alternative strategies for struggling house museums. Her proposals include merging with another house-museum organization, leasing the property to a for-profit entity, or selling outright. (Hosley, in his brash way, likes to refer to this book as “The Final Solution for House Museums.”)

Historic New England has also assumed a lead role in the discussion about the future of failing house museums in recent years. The organization maintains 36 public historic sites in the region, but it also operates a formal [Stewardship Easement Program](#) that offers struggling house museums (and other owners of historic properties) the means to sell while also legally guaranteeing that certain features will be preserved in perpetuity. “There are lots of ways to preserve a building without making it a museum,” Nold said.

A few high-profile house museums have closed in recent years. People who want to visit the boyhood home of Robert E. Lee in Alexandria, Va., which served as a house museum for 30 years, are now out of luck, for example: The Civil War preservation group that owned it shut down and sold it to a private owner in 2000. Several of the National Trust’s 20 traditional house museums are also in transition to new models. But despite the drumbeat of calls to rethink their missions, or even to close, Harris says she has seen little evidence that many house museums have taken her advice since her book was published in 2007. “If you’re talking about a community institution, a landmark that people have been concerned about for generations, getting their stewards, their board of directors, to try to take action is very hard,” she said. “A lot of it is very emotional.”

It seems inevitable, however, that not all house museums will survive forever in their current forms. They may find vital new lives as youth centers, revert to use as private homes, or be pressed into service to house, educate, or entertain their communities in other ways, perhaps even more effectively than they did as quiet history museums. But that’s not to say that they won’t be missed. “You know palpably when you go into a community that’s turned its back on its past,” Yaeger said. “There’s a sense of loss there.”

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