

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK FOR THEIR
CARE, PRESERVATION, & MANAGEMENT

HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

SHERRY BUTCHER-YOUNGHANS



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Sherry Butcher-Youngans

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THE MOST NUMEROUS kind of museum in the United States is the historic house museum. Beginning with America's first historic site, the Hasbrouck House at Newburgh, which New York State acquired because it had been one of Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters, Americans have had a penchant for preserving houses of historic importance and turning them into museums. That trend was accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s by a wave of patriotism with the bicentennial of the Revolution and a growing awareness of the tragic destruction of much of our physical heritage in the name of urban renewal. Today, approximately one-half of all museums in the country are history museums; and, among these, historic houses and sites outnumber all the rest.

We who work in the history museum field know these historic house museums to be among the smallest museums in terms of staff and budget. Many of them, in fact, are run entirely by volunteers. It is not surprising, then, that many historic house museums do not meet the professional standards of the museum profession. For some, this is because they lack adequate financial resources. It has been my observation, though, that the inadequacies as often stem from their being run by people who lack the training or knowledge to do the job right. They do not know how, and they do not know who to turn to for the help they need. They feel intimidated by the regional and national professional meetings, which are attended almost entirely by professionals; and they feel that they are looked down upon by the professional museum people who might be able to provide the answers.

It is the good fortune of these historic house museums that a very capable professional, who empathizes with them, has now provided many of the answers to the question: How can we do our job the right way? Sherry Butcher-Youngmans, in *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for Their Care, Preservation, and Management* has made a very important contribution to our field. She poses

basic questions: What is the mission of the organization? How is it organized? What do trustees do, and how do they relate to the director and staff? Where can you go for help? How do you collect and care for collections? How do you preserve the house for future generations? How do you realize the ultimate purpose of helping the public understand the meaning and importance of the house museum? And finally, how can you use volunteers in accomplishing these things?

Ms. Butcher-Youngmans draws on considerable work experience in the museum field, plus a solid academic background in anthropology, museology, and history, to produce a volume that deals effectively with theory and practice, philosophy, and reality. She does not patronize the reader, nor does she gloss over the inadequacies of many house museums. She makes clear the fiduciary responsibilities we all bear for the buildings and objects in our care and makes clear the consequences to future generations of improper conservation and care of the objects and buildings we hold in public trust.

This is a book that belongs on the working book shelf of every historic house museum and, indeed, on the book shelf of every small museum. Its lessons on governance, collecting, conservation, and interpretation apply equally well to museums of all disciplines. We are all indebted to Ms. Butcher-Youngmans for an enriching addition to the literature of our field.

December 1991

WILLIAM T. ALDERSON
Former director,
The American Association for
State and Local History

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August 1992
Eden Prairie, Minn.

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Introduction

Take the Art of Building—the strongest—proudest—most orderly—most enduring of the arts of man; that of which the produce is in the surest manner accumulative, and need not perish, or be replaced; but if once well done, will stand more strongly than the unbalanced rocks—more prevalently than the crumbling hills. The art is associated with all civic pride and sacred principle; with which men record their power—satisfy their enthusiasm—make sure their defence—define and make dear their habitation.

John Ruskin, *Selections from the Works of John Ruskin*

RESTORING HOUSES OF the past and establishing them as museums has a long history in this country, a tradition heavily influenced by the English custom of preserving ancient buildings and monuments. The earliest house museums in the United States—Hambrook House in Newburgh, New York, and Mount Vernon in Virginia—were both associated with our first president. Each site was saved in the 1850s by insightful and public-minded individuals.

As time went by, more and more houses were rescued from the ravages of time or demolition crews and placed in the hands of trustees who managed the museums for the public. In the 1930s, Laurence Vail Coleman, longtime director of the American Association of Museums, wrote that he could trace the rise of historic houses established as museums “from about twenty open in 1895 to nearly a hundred in 1910 and to more than four hundred now.”¹

By the 1970s, thousands of museum houses across the nation had opened their doors. Since the beginning, about 6,000 historic properties have been preserved.² The public’s enthusiasm for knowledge of its cultural past had greatly increased as Americans



Winterthur Museum in Winterthur, Delaware, displays two hundred historic-room settings of American decorative arts spanning the time period 1640 to 1840. The staff at Winterthur includes highly trained specialists who care for collections, historic buildings, and gardens. (Photograph courtesy of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum)

redefined their attachment to history, especially on personal and local levels. They flocked to historic house museums in great numbers, hoping to capture some of the essence of America's past. It became important to know which house in town was the oldest and which was the former estate of the penniless immigrant who started the successful local industry. These museums are symbolic and bear witness to who we are and where we have come from.

At first, houses were saved because of their association with those

who designed or built them, or made them their headquarters. We saved homes that belonged to U.S. presidents, famous authors, infamous frontiersmen, men who amassed great fortunes and built estates to prove it, and men who were in the vanguard of America's wars. These were homes of the elite, usually white and most commonly male, not a representative sample of America's history. Yet a movement has been afoot to balance the view of our past, to bring the lives of everyday people, including minorities, into focus. It is now becoming possible for visitors to see how a coal miner and his family might have lived in a shack in Pennsylvania or where domestic servants lived on the great estate of an industrialist or how enslaved people carried out their lives on antebellum planta-



Log homes are commonly restored and operated as house museums in the midwestern United States. This cabin, built in the dovetail style, was constructed in the 1850s by Swedish immigrants. (Photograph courtesy of V. S. Arrowsmith, Isanti County, Minnesota)