Sixty Years of Historic Preservation: The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

By EDWARD P. ALEXANDER
DIRECTOR OF INTERPRETATION, COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

WHEN William Sumner Appleton founded the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1910, the preservation movement in this country was high-minded but naïve. The chief American contribution had been the historic house museum. New York State in 1849 acquired the Hasbrouck House, Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, as the pioneer effort in the field, though Washington's Mount Vernon plantation on the Potomac, opened in 1860 by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, was better known. The founders of these museums regarded them as historic shrines and believed that they would inspire an almost religious fervor of patriotism in those who visited them. A committee that included Washington Irving in 1839 tried to raise the purchase money for the Hasbrouck House and used this argument:

> No traveller who touches upon the shores of Orange County, will hesitate to make a pilgrimage to this beautiful spot, associated as it is with so many delightful reminiscences of our early history. And if he have an American heart in his bosom, he will feel himself to be a better man; his patriotism will kindle with deeper emotion; his aspirations for his country's good will ascend from a more devout mind, for having visited "Head-Quarters of Washington."

Most of the historic house museums were founded and administered by voluntary organizations dominated by energetic women. Ann Pamela Cunningham, a frail but determined maiden lady from South Carolina, was the first great personality of American preservation. She organized the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and raised $200,000 to purchase Washington's plantation after the Federal Government and the Commonwealth of Virginia had refused to acquire it. Miss Cunningham had a talent for organization and promotion. As Regent of the Ladies' Association, she chose prominent, driving Vice-Regents in some thirty states, saw that they appointed good county and municipal managers, and outlined an assortment of imaginative money-raising schemes. For two years her monthly magazine, *The Mount Vernon Record*, supplied editors throughout the country with excellent news releases about the financial drive for Mount Vernon.

Despite the accomplishments of the early house museums, the methods they customarily used seem now crude and unscientific. William Ivins has wittily said that, from the point of view of the arts, the period was one of taste unadulterated by knowledge. At Mount Vernon, for example, the delicate business of preserving and maintaining the fabric of the mansion sometimes was left to the tender mercies of army engineers. Each room in the mansion was supervised by a

Vice-Regent who followed her own taste in choosing the furnishings. Research into inventories and other primary historical documents was then virtually unknown. Nor were there available architectural historians to apply the detective-like techniques of stripping exterior surfaces or interior plaster to study framing; of examining plaster, laths, and nails for clues to changes; or of scraping paint layers to discover the early colors. The ideal of historical authenticity for building, interiors, and setting was not yet clearly developed.

The historic house museums also suffered from a myopic provincialism. The women's committees, though good at raising money, guiding visitors through the houses, and holding tea parties, seldom knew what was going on in preservation projects elsewhere in the United States, to say nothing of other countries. Mount Vernon's fame had spread, and other historic houses sometimes referred to themselves as "second only to Mount Vernon," but this case was a distinct exception. American historic houses were unaware of French governmental efforts to preserve *monuments historiques* that had been going on since 1830 and were imitated in most countries of Europe, of the outdoor or open-air folk museums established throughout Scandinavia after 1891, of the English National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty organized in 1895, or of the culture history arrangement used in history museums at Nuremberg, Munich, and Zurich.

Sumner Appleton was the second great personality to appear in American historic preservation. This imaginative enthusiast—smiling, kindly, patient, democratic, modest—was obsessed with an idea that became ever clearer, ever stronger in his thirty-seven years at the helm of the S.P.N.E.A. Here are some of the ways he first expressed it:

> Our New England antiquities are fast disappearing because no society has made their preservation its exclusive object. That is the reason for the formation of this Society.
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> The situation requires aggressive action by a large and strong society, which shall cover the whole field and act instantly whenever needed to lead in preservation of noteworthy buildings and historic sites.
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> The lack of historic interest of the first rank [in the Swett-Ilsley House] was not considered a vital point, and although the architectural features of the house did not then appear to be of as great importance as those of many other old houses, they were still of great merit and the house itself of an early date and one the loss of which would be regretted.
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> It is proposed to preserve the most interesting of these buildings by obtaining control of them through gift, purchase, or otherwise, and then to restore them, and finally to let them to tenants under wise restrictions, unless local conditions suggest some other treatment. It is anticipated that arrangements can be made by which members of the Society may inspect each building at stated times. This plan has the merit . . . of leaving . . . [each structure] on the local tax list.

Appleton therefore broadened greatly the cutting edge of American historic preservation. Architectural or aesthetic quality was as good a reason to preserve a building as was historical importance. Residential and adaptive uses were often better and more practical ways of preserving buildings than making them museums. Also, the Society used the cooperative approach; it frequently helped other organizations save and administer buildings instead of having the Society do so. For example, in 1935 Appleton was a wheelhorse in the drive that succeeded in raising $75,000 in a five-day whirlwind campaign to save the Christopher Gore Mansion (1805) of Waltham, Massachusetts. In this project the Trustees of

Public Reservations in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Society of Colonial Dames, and the Massachusetts Society of Architects worked with the S.P.N.E.A.

The Society also began to develop a more professional approach toward preservation problems. Appleton favored a large, democratically based membership organization with low dues kept in touch with Society activities through a quarterly bulletin that was soon named OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND. He also used annual appeals to the members as a device to finance the curative measures demanded by the most pressing preservation crises. Though professional training had not yet developed for preservation architects and other specialists, Appleton wisely sought advice from antiquarians who through their own efforts had made themselves experts in the preservation field. Among these men was George Francis Dow, who at the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1907 had produced the first true historical period rooms. He became director of the Society's Museum in 1918 and wrote an important study of *Every Day Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* published by the Society in 1935. Thus Appleton built a viable preservation organization that combined enthusiastic amateur men and women, generous donors, and the best-trained expert preservationists then available. He managed to harness the kind of enthusiasm and energy that the amateur women's groups had demonstrated elsewhere under a more disciplined, research oriented, and professional direction.

Sumner Appleton contributed his services as corresponding secretary or director of the Society for thirty-seven years and also often used his own money to help achieve its objectives. Since he was a bachelor with an independent income, he enjoyed more freedom than most executives. His daily work routine was somewhat unconventional. He sometimes became so engrossed in a problem that he lost all sense of time and would telephone Society officers or staff members at any hour day or night. So contagious was his enthusiasm that the Society grew to have nearly 3,500 members before the economic depression of the 1930's.

The Society's professional approach to preservation brought more scientific methods to bear on the task. An excellent historical library was gathered that included more than 500,000 photographs of New England buildings. A New England Museum collected architectural, decorative art, and historical objects; the museum holdings crowded the central headquarters at the Otis House and also contributed furniture and furnishings to Society buildings opened to the public throughout New England. OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND not only enabled the Society to communicate with its members but also encouraged research in New England three-dimensional history by providing an attractive outlet for scholarly publication.

Appleton's knowledge of preservation architectural methods was sound. "Photograph, measure, and record," was his first rule. He believed in doing as little restoration work as necessary on an old building and in making sure that what was done was carefully marked and recorded. "What is left today can be changed tomorrow," he said, "whereas what is removed today can perhaps never be put back." In connection with some repairs to the Eleazer Arnold House of Lincoln, Rhode Island, he wrote:

> If, for instance, we take out an oak sill 6 x 7 [inches], hand hewn, 12 feet long with six

mortice holes, I like to put back exactly that identical thing, counting on my photographs [and] the manuscript record in our files . . . to tell any future investigator that this is not the original sill, always supposing he isn't able to recognize the difference by looking at it.

This conservative approach to restoration meant that Appleton and the Society emphasized the use of an old house as a document, even though they recognized the value of the museum approach. They usually opposed taking down paneling in rooms and re-erecting it in museums and were strongly against transporting English manor houses to this country. They insisted upon preserving important architecture in situ where at all possible. "No restoration, it would seem," wrote Abbott Lowell Cummings in commenting on these policies, "can be flawless, but the carefully recorded restoration will have the double advantage of authentic interest for the visitor and value as a source of factual information for the student." This doctrine is still sound today.

When Appleton died in 1947, the Society possessed fifty-one historic structures situated throughout New England and valued at $857,700 as well as an endowment of $507,800 earmarked for their preservation. Its headquarters was the handsome Harrison Gray Otis House (1795) in Boston, the main meeting room of which was named Appleton Hall during the Society's thirtieth anniversary celebration.

Appleton also was mindful of the need for better organization of the national preservation movement. He gave advice freely to other preservationists scattered about the country and especially on the East Coast. In 1919 he favored having four regional organizations (his own Society, of course, and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, and the Archaeological Institute of America) secure large endowment funds so that they could make grants to local societies and furnish wise supervision of preservation work. By 1926 he was suggesting that the Archaeological Institute of America oversee a nationwide plan for financing preservation.

What is needed in this country [he wrote] is a fund of say five million dollars in the hands of a board of trustees having power to distribute its income up and down the whole country wherever most needed in order to preserve what is best. Probably the most efficacious way of using this would be to pay for the endowment of a property, provided local interest attended to the purchase. The endowment is generally the most expensive and difficult part of the undertaking and its application to the house could always be made dependent on its purchase within a certain definite time and its proper care by some local body.

Appleton for many years tried to obtain support for a New England outdoor museum. In 1919 he fully outlined his plan, which he thought would cost from $200,000 to $500,000 in addition to the land. He advocated a series of villages, each representing a half century of New England history.

This would mean a group of six tiny villages covering New England's history up to date, each village with its meeting house situated on the village green or facing the village square and surrounded by the typical buildings of its period. . . . Probably few of these buildings would be of the first rank, for all such our Society must aim to keep on the original sites, but there are a host of lesser buildings of minor importance, but still well worth preserving, which would serve the purpose of the outdoor museum, and it is of such that these representative villages would doubtless be composed. Sooner or later such a museum will surely be started somewhere in New England and it

would be pleasant indeed if it could be done under the auspices of our Society.

Appleton renewed his call for this outdoor museum on many occasions as, for example, when Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford purchased and renovated Wayside Inn at South Sudbury, Massachusetts (1924) or when a Royal Commission recommended an Open-Air Museum for Britain (1930). Appleton even considered having the Society establish an English village in New England with the houses, tithe-barns, and windmills then growing scarce in England. He lived to see Old Sturbridge Village, devoted to the story of New England life, opened in 1946.

The Society has carried on since his death in 1947 the preservation principles and activities so soundly established by Sumner Appleton. Bertram K. Little, who has served as corresponding secretary and director of the Society since that day, was trained under Appleton, and he has brought wise leadership to the Society and made it an ever more effective and professional organization. Since 1955 Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings has served as assistant director and given the Society the benefit of the discipline of the trained architectural historian.

The chain of buildings administered by the Society has grown to contain sixty-seven structures. They were valued in 1969 at $1,240,159, and the endowments used to support them had a market value of $3,391,613. These properties have been well managed; since 1947, the Society has not hesitated to sell buildings that were difficult to maintain, had insufficient historical or architectural interest, or that it concluded some other institution could run effectively. In 1960, for example, the trustees disposed of ten properties and acquired ten new ones. As a result of these activities, there has been a steady upgrading of the Society's holdings. In 1966 the Society made more definite a trend it had always favored by establishing a separate Preservation Management Program based on the "concept that structures of specific architectural or community importance but not of 'museum' quality can be preserved by rental occupancy or on a self-supporting and tax-paying basis."

The Society has also become the key preservation organization of all New England. Not only has it favored the preservation of individual houses of historical and architectural worth, but also historical districts that may contain some of these important structures as well as lesser buildings that still add to the historic environment or atmosphere. Thus the Society helped secure the Massachusetts Historic Districts Act of 1960 and has provided representatives on the boards regulating districts such as Beacon Hill in Boston or Newburyport. Dr. Cummings as adjunct professor at Boston University also has communicated the Society's principles to students of architectural history and preservation. With the increased governmental support provided by the Federal Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Society can look forward to ever greater service. Its ability to act quickly and flexibly places it in a most strategic spot to implement new federal and state legislation that supports thorough landmarks surveys, makes matching grants for actual physical preservation and restoration, establishes and maintains historic districts, encourages the use of historic zoning, and experiments with the relatively new device of the historic easement.

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has made much preservation history in its first sixty years. It has applied the New England idea of voluntary private help and common sense direct action to the preservation movement. The results have attracted admiration and imitation in other states that had depended more upon governmental action and legislation. The Society's experience and continuing achievements would seem to show that a most successful formula for historic preservation can be a combination of governmental and private efforts. As the concepts of residential and adaptive uses and the historic district spread throughout the land, the example and the work of the Society becomes ever more important. The Society may be said to have developed the following five principles for effective historic preservation work by private state or regional agencies:

1. Adopt a strong and energetic "preservation for use" policy. The agency will operate historic house museums occasionally when they will carry themselves, but it will emphasize residential use of buildings (after all, most of them were built as residences) and consonant adaptive use as offices, community centers, headquarters, antique shops, tearooms, and the like. The agency will, if necessary, sell or lease buildings under restrictions that will guarantee their preservation. This kind of use will sometimes result in historic districts of considerable extent in which each building is protected in its exterior appearance and setting by historic zoning or by historic easements.

2. Operate historic house museum properties strictly according to sound scientific principles. They demand careful research by historian, archaeologist, architect, landscape designer, and curator so as to obtain authentic buildings, settings, and furnishings as well as accurate and lively interpretation.

3. Centralize the administration of preservation properties in order to secure high standards of quality and economy. A single regional or statewide administration can afford expert advice, can secure adherence to authenticity and, if appropriate, excellent interpretation, and can establish a coordinated system of such properties.

4. See that its governing Board limits itself to setting policy and that it obtains a talented professional staff to carry out policy and provide leadership at both state and local levels. Such leadership will welcome assistance from the members and will help organize effective volunteer services.

5. Obtain a large, influential, and enthusiastic membership that will provide volunteer services and also help finance a revolving preservation fund to acquire threatened properties of historical or architectural worth. The membership should also help build up an endowment to supplement the maintenance of such structures, whether used as museums, residences, or for some other purpose consonant with their preservation.