What Is An Historic House Museum?

Excerpts from a Speech Given on April 24, 1971 at the *Preservation In Process* Conference Held at Old Sturbridge Village

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LET me move on to consider some ideas concerning preservation and to let you know what approaches and actions the Society is now taking with regard to its historic house museums. And here I might say that I am not attempting an exact definition of an historic house museum. In general, we believe in a broad definition. An historic house museum can be a number of things other than a furnished house. A house without furniture which shows unusual decorative detail or surface treatment or a house which reveals evidence of structural methods can be a house museum. Also, I believe that house museums can and should range the socioeconomic scale. And, finally, perhaps they don't even have to be houses. What we do think is important, crucial in fact, is the approach that we take to the historic house museum after we have included it in our definition.

All organizations owning or caring for historic buildings are, in a sense, trustees of those buildings, of their history, of their architecture, of their contents, of their past as well as their present and future. These buildings have entered what might be called *preservation status* and require the highest degree of care. How then should a preservation organization in possession of an historic building, treat this trust? We believe (with exceptions which will be the subject of a future article) that the building should be preserved as it was when it entered preservation status with its history to that moment, 1971 perhaps, intact. We no longer believe in nor practice restoration of those buildings which are coming to us. The reason for this is that it has become increasingly apparent to us that restoration is generally a destructive force, destructive of an often substantial portion of the architecture and of the history of a house which is subjected to it. It can also unfortunately be a creative force—almost inevitably gaps in knowledge lead to guesswork, hopefully (though not always, I'm afraid) informed guesswork. And taste, or perhaps more accurately "good taste," is given a chance to rear its head.

Let us consider for a moment why we preserve historic houses and open them to the public. Subjectively the motives can be quite complex, but on an objective plane, I believe that we preserve historic house museums to educate the public in our past in order that they may better understand the present and future. We preserve them sometimes with public approval, sometimes without, or in the face of total apathy, as those who have fought to preserve buildings of the second half of the nineteenth century are well aware. For the latter and for our Society, there is a two-fold educational problem; not only should the public learn about the past, they also must be shown why that segment of the past, and the time succeeding it up to the present, is important.

We believe that the responsibility of the educator, the preservationist in this case, is to convey to the public not necessarily what they want to see or perhaps expect to see, but rather to show them the past as part of the continuum of life leading to the present and on to the future. Barring certain "great moments in time" houses where an event of overriding importance took place (none of these are owned by the Society), we try to show that not just one yesterday but all yesterdays are part of the history of a house, and we do this by preserving the whole span of a house's life from construction up to the time when preservation status is entered.

Preservation has one great attribute which deserves emphasis; it does not involve the destruction of things beyond recall. Nothing is destroyed, which is not to say, of course, that necessary work on structure or utilities is left undone. One of the problems with restoration is that it often does involve the destruction of things beyond recall. Things are removed or destroyed. Once gone, they are often gone forever. If this must be done, we believe that thorough documentation should be undertaken, including photographs, drawings, removal to storage, labeling and so on. How seldom all these things are done, we all know, and the architectural historian of the future is the loser.

The approach to the historic house described above fits hand-in-glove with our belief that an historic house museum must be a living thing. A house whose history is preserved in its entirety to the present day will look as if its owner had just stepped out. The magazines are in the rack, the gew-gaws are on the table, the furniture may be just a bit shabby and of different periods, the fireplace may have a stove in front of it, the mantelpiece may be later than the paneling; the house looks lived in.

Contrast this with the restored historic house museum, and I realize that I am generalizing from the worst particulars. The woodwork is now all of a period; the original fireplace is opened up and rebuilt. Gone is the Greek Revival mantlepiece and coal grate or stove which early owners put in to get more heat, and gone is a part of the history of the house and of the lives of our forebears. The woodwork is fresh and bright and the colors are in excellent taste, hopefully accurate, but always in good taste. The little window panes, which early owners couldn't wait to get rid of and did when they could afford larger ones, are back in place. The wide floor boards have been finished and are gleaming; the fact that they may never have seen the light of day between construction and restoration is overlooked. The public expects to see wide floorboards but learns nothing or the wrong thing from seeing them. The furniture is perfectly beautiful, polished and in excellent repair as if never used. Did people really use such a room?

Rare, indeed, is the twentieth-century person who, in the course of a restoration, can throw himself back into, say, the eighteenth century so successfully that he will thoroughly understand that way of living, especially the day-to-day living, the received impression of which breathes life into a house. Rarely are documentation and evidence so complete that guesswork and taste don't enter in. Houses and rooms restored to a given moment or period tend to look like just what they are. They do not looked lived in.

Time is a continuing process. People change; their ideas and tastes change, and these changes are reflected in their way of living, in the additions to and re-

modelings of their houses, in the introduction of new pieces of furniture, in the adoption of the latest method of cooking or of heating a house. The house reflects varying fortunes, strivings for comfort and convenience and changing or revolving tastes. To restore a house is to deny this; to preserve a house as it comes to us is to affirm it.