

Visiting the Past:

History Museums

in the United States



(Top) Hostess and Visitors at Governors Palace, Williamsburg, 1967. (Bottom) Black History Program at Williamsburg, 1990. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)

On any given summer afternoon, a considerable number of Americans visit the past. They drive to Greenfield Village, or Colonial Williamsburg, or Old Sturbridge. They stroll through old houses, admire antique cars, or watch colonial farmers and shoemakers at work. Perhaps they also see a movie, read a guidebook, or listen to costumed interpreters explain the way things used to be. Hundreds of these history museums dot the U.S. landscape, and it seems reasonable to suppose that they help shape popular perspectives about the past.

In this essay I intend to discuss the kinds of perspectives the museums promote. By looking at their history, I will try to demonstrate that from the mid-nineteenth century on, most history museums were constructed by members of dominant classes and embodied interpretations that supported their sponsors' privileged positions. I do not contend that those who established museums were Machiavellian plotters; the museum builders simply embedded in their efforts versions of history that were commonplaces of their class's culture. From the 1930s onward, elite control of these markers of the public memory came under increasing challenge. My survey examines how the museums responded and concludes with some speculations on their future.

Pioneering the Past

Antebellum Americans were not sentimental about saving old buildings. In the midst of the War of 1812, the State of Pennsylvania tried to tear down Independence Hall and sell the land to commercial developers.

Protests saved the building, but not before two wings had been demolished and the woodwork stripped from the room in which the Declaration of Independence had been signed. Most other venerable buildings situated on valuable real estate fared less well. This exuberant and cavalier demolition of the remains of the past reflected partly a booming land market and partly the antihistorical bent captured in Thoreau's contemptuous dismissal of England as "an old gentleman who is travelling with a great deal of baggage, trumpery which accumulated from long housekeeping, which he has not had the courage to burn."¹ It was not until the approach of Civil War in the 1850s that a small segment of the patriciate, frightened that the Republic was coming apart and persuaded that a memorial to the nation's founders might serve as an antidote, began to reconsider this position. In 1850 Governor Hamilton Fish asked the New York State Legislature to save George Washington's revolutionary headquarters in Newburgh from impending demolition. The legislators agreed, noting, "It will be good for our citizens in these days when we hear the sound of disunion reiterated from every part of the country . . . to chasten their minds by reviewing the history of our revolutionary struggle." On 4 July 1850 the flag was raised over the first historic house in the United States—as much a shrine as a museum.²

Three years later a group of businessmen tried to buy Mount Vernon and turn it into a hotel. This provoked another and far more significant preservation effort. The governor of Virginia asked John Washington, the current occupant, to sell it to the state. Washington agreed, but asked a stiff two hundred thousand dollars. The price, he noted somewhat defensively, "may appear to be extravagant, yet I have good reason to believe it is not more than could be readily obtained for the property were it in the Public Market." The governor asked the Virginia legislature to appropriate the funds, arguing that although the figure might be "exorbitant," if considered as an "ordinary transaction of business, . . . dollars become as dust when compared with the inestimable patriotism inspired by a visit to the tomb." The outraged legislators balked, and the movement to preserve Mount Vernon shifted to private hands.³

Ann Pamela Cunningham, daughter of a wealthy South Carolina planter, announced a crusade to save the homesite. She, too, wanted to create a rallying point for nationalist forces, but was perhaps even more worried by the disintegrating effect of a commercial and capitalist political economy, of which the attempt by "soulless speculators" to disturb "the shades of the dead," was yet another symptom. Because it was thought to be woman's special role to preserve the frail bonds of social solidarity against threatening commerce, she turned for help to wealthy, socially prominent women who had family connections to the Revolutionary generation. Cunningham and her new colleagues formed the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA)

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and set out to create a "shrine where at least the mothers of the land and their innocent children might make their offering in the cause of the greatness, goodness and prosperity of their country." The MVLA campaign soon attracted members of the middle and upper classes, North and South, who were working to preserve the Union. Edward Everett, a former Massachusetts senator and secretary of state, gave an immensely popular oration on the life of Washington to 139 gatherings across the country and contributed the proceeds to the MVLA. He hoped that Mount Vernon would offer "a common heritage for the estranged children of a common father, the spell of whose memory will yet have the power to reunite them around his hallowed sepulchre."⁴

Mount Vernon was saved in 1859, but the Washington cult failed to spark a pro-Union revival. Nor did it inaugurate a widespread change in attitude to the past. John Hancock's house was demolished during the Civil War: He had been an exemplary revolutionary hero, but when the market value of the land reached one hundred and twenty thousand dollars his birthplace was turned over to the wreckers. In the postwar Gilded Age, it was definitely business as usual, and even the centennial celebrations of 1876 looked more to the dynamos of the future than the inheritance of the past.⁵ Still, the crusaders of the 1850s had blazed a trail to the past. Their legacy included an insistence that private gain be subordinated to larger concerns; a demonstration that it was possible to appropriate the aura that Washington's presence had invested in particular buildings and put it to work; and a certification that it was proper for upper-class women to preserve and present history to the public.

In the 1880s the dominant classes' attitude toward history began to change. By the 1890s it had undergone a remarkable transformation. Upper and middle-class men and women established great numbers of ancestral societies and historical associations. They also set about rescuing old buildings and displaying them to the public, preserving battlefield sites, and erecting shrines and monuments. By 1895 there were twenty house museums; by 1910 there were one hundred.⁶ How are we to account for this?

These were, of course, years of triumph and consolidation for corporate capitalism in the United States. But the masters of the new order—the industrial magnates, the financiers, the old patrician families, and the powerful middle class of managers and professionals—found their position contested by social classes who had also been summoned into being by the new order of things. The battles with discontented workers, discontented artisans, and disgruntled small farmers were often brutal and direct trials of military, political, and economic strength. But the combat had cultural dimensions as well, and it was in this area that new attitudes toward history were generated.

The Haymarket affair and the great strikes of the 1880s appear to have galvanized the bourgeoisie into reconsidering its disregard for tradition. Convinced that immigrant aliens with subversive ideologies were destroying the Republic, elites fashioned a new collective identity for themselves. They believed that there was such a thing as the American inheritance and that they were its legitimate custodians. Class struggle was transmuted into defense of "American values" against outside agitators.⁷

The progenitors of this class culture were chiefly the older patrician elite—those who had inherited landed, mercantile, or early industrial wealth. They found longstanding cultural and political authority suddenly being challenged; the Adams family's turn to the past accelerated markedly after the Knights of Labor captured the Quincy town meeting in 1887. Nor were they pleased with the rough-hewn plutocrats whose command of immense concentrations of capital had catapulted them to political prominence. Patricians discovered in their historical pedigrees a source of cultural and psychic self-confidence and took the lead in forming a host of new institutions. Some were exclusive ancestral societies like the Sons of the American Revolution (1889), the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) (1890), and the Mayflower Descendants (1897). They also took part in establishing historical societies and preservation groups, like the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (1888), the Native Sons of the Golden West (1888), the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society (1895), and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (1910).⁸

Patricians formed the vanguard of these groups, but the rank and file often included middle-class professionals, small business owners, and civic and political leaders. Some big capitalists followed their lead, either as members (John D. Rockefeller joined the SAR) or as fiscal underwriters (Jay Gould supported the still-flourishing MVLA and C.F. Crocker, California's first millionaire, aided the Golden Sons), but the center of gravity of the movement lay in the ranks of the old monied.⁹

A central and enthusiastically pursued activity of these groups was the construction of shrines and memorials, including finding and marking the graves of old soldiers.¹⁰ The MVLA was the model; many leaders of the new organizations were daughters of MVLA members. They sought out, bought up, restored, and displayed the houses in which famous persons had lived. These projects enabled the elite to associate themselves and their class with the virtuous and glorious dead. In the process they also constructed and cultivated a class aesthetic: seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture became something of a cultural emblem. Some groups (like the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, founded by William Sumner Appleton, grandson of Nathan Appleton, one of the first textile magnates) were

- 8 consequently willing to preserve buildings hallowed by association with the entire pre-immigrant social order, even if not connected with any particularly distinguished patriot. This class aesthetic tastefully demarcated them from both immigrants and vulgar nouveaux riches—the railroad barons, mine owners, and streetcar magnates, who were then transporting dismantled European castles to the United States in order to live in “simulated feudal grandeur.”¹¹

The Americanization Campaign

The house museums also served a didactic function in the patricians' cultural offensive. Along with campaigns for patriotic and military education and drives to foster a cult of flag and Constitution, the museums sought to “Americanize” the immigrant working class. The shrines were thought magically to transform aliens brought within their walls. Mrs. J. V. R. Townsend, Colonial Dame, vice-regent of the MVLA, and chairwoman of the Van Cortlandt House Committee in New York City, explained in 1900 that the “Americanizing of the children—by enlisting their interest in historical sites and characters has a great significance to any thinking mind—the making of good citizens of these many foreign youths.” Good citizenship meant accepting bourgeois rules of political action and abandoning radicalism. The working classes, one speaker told the Sons of the American Revolution, “must be educated out of all these crass and crazy notions of popular rights . . . into a true understanding of American liberty as handed down by our Fathers.” The past, including the revolutionary tradition, had been transformed into an abstract symbol of order.¹²

It is difficult to assess the impact of this Americanizing campaign. A rich literature shows that working-class communities fought to preserve their various national customs, traditions, and communal cultures. Sometimes their efforts took defensive, conservative, and ethnocentric forms; at other times they offered a base for revolutionary fervor. But always the community provided a self-identity that aided resistance.¹³

It seems likely that the Americanization campaigns had the greatest impact on those who organized them. The bourgeoisie buckled History around themselves like moral armor. The more they felt threatened, the more they grew convinced of their inherent, because inherited, legitimacy. Finally, what had been a relatively benevolent, if patronizing and provincial, mentality turned nasty and belligerent. Groups like the Immigration Restriction League (IRL)—bankers and professors driven to the point of hysteria by strikers and socialists—began to argue, with ever-greater racism and religious bigotry, that, in the words of IRL member John Fiske (the ancestral societies' favorite historian), “the antidote to the bane of foreign immigration”