

Common Challenges Faced by Historic House Museums: A Conversation with the Fairfield Heritage Association

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Any visitor to the Georgian Museum or the Sherman House Museum in downtown Lancaster will immediately be impressed by how much the Fairfield Heritage Association (FHA) is getting right. With a professional staff of three, including Executive Director Andrea Brooker, Office Manager Mary Lawrence, and Assistant Office Manager Kady Wolfe, as well as a dedicated cadre of hard-working volunteers, FHA's two major sites reflect the organization's commitment to best practices. During a recent visit to the Georgian Museum, I sat down with Andrea, Mary, and Kady to discuss common challenges of running historic house museums: collections and volunteers. They shared some strategies that help manage these issues.

Storage and maintenance top the list of collections issues. While the museum standard for artifact storage is a constant environmental temperature between 68 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit with a relative humidity of 50%, it can be difficult to maintain storage areas at that level due to budget constraints or an inability to convert a historic structure. In this case, the best storage option is to utilize spaces that offer the best protection from the elements, like interior closets, dresser drawers, and even areas under beds. Or, you can put the entire collection on exhibit, but this is seldom practical. In all cases, it is essential to carefully inspect the condition of both the building and collection items regularly. As Mary quipped, "Don't forget about what's in the closet!"

Some storage shortages can be avoided by writing a collections policy. As the FHA team all agreed, "You can't be the com-



The basement of the Fairfield Heritage Association's Sherman House Museum. Photo courtesy of the Fairfield Heritage Association.

munity's attic." This is a particularly crucial point for FHA because in addition to operating the house museums, it serves as the historical society for Fairfield County. Andrea noted that they have been fortunate because their organization implemented a policy early on, a decision that has helped keep their collection manageable. "It buys you time to stop and think," she said, "about what you collect and why you collect it. It defines your mission and outlines your interpretive plan."

FHA is also exploring ways to present the county's history more broadly. Currently, the staff and board of directors are working to develop a county history collection that does not require storage space. One solution already in place is the use of temporary exhibits. These changing attractions give even long-time members a reason to rediscover the museums. Another potential solution is a "virtual museum," which functions as a digital catalog of artifacts and documents in private collections.

The second great challenge for any historic house museum is attracting and retaining volunteers. Like many other history organizations, FHA relies on people who have retired from full-time employment. While these volunteers are dependable and dedicated, the organization needs to also attract younger members who will remain invested into the future. The FHA staff had three recommendations: be proactive, be flexible, and keep the lines of communication open.

FHA has been proactive in attracting interns from local universities. In fact, Kady served as an intern before she was hired as a permanent employee. Andrea recommends reaching out to local universities and high schools, as well as looking beyond history majors for potential interns. Education, graphic art, non-profit management, and urban development are also majors from which to draw talented young volunteers. Drawing volunteers from younger age brackets requires thinking outside the box and breaking out of the traditional volunteer categories. While
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people with full-time jobs or younger children might like to be involved, they are usually not available during daytime museum hours. However, they might be able to assist with special events in the evenings or on weekends. A “once-in-a-while” commitment can grow to more when they have greater availability down the road.

While attracting new faces is important, retaining veterans deserves just as much effort. The keys are flexibility and communication. Andrea and Mary recommend regularly reevaluating how both the physical environment and scheduling are working for volunteers. Are the facilities accessible to them? For older volunteers, installing handrails and adjusting lighting are accommodations that can reduce stress and increase safety. Scheduling more than

one volunteer per shift can reduce fatigue and may encourage people to increase their hours. Some museums might consider making upstairs exhibits self-guided, as FHA has done in the Sherman House. If a volunteer is experiencing decreased mobility, he or she can take on tasks that can be done at home, such as making calls or helping with mailings. The main thing is to keep the lines of communication open.

While the FHA staff has plenty of useful tips to offer, they are also interested in receiving input from other local history organizations, particularly regarding a major project they are undertaking. With funding from the state’s capital improvement budget for 2015-2016, they will be adapting the basement of the Sherman House and the unfinished attic of the Georgian Museum to increase storage space and create secure,

climate-controlled spaces. The FHA team would love to hear from anyone willing to share their experiences with this type of project. The staff may be reached at 740.654.9923 or director@fairfieldheritage.org. ■