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Private vs. Public: The Role of Funding in New England's Literary House Museums

Are New England's literary home museums better off if held under private or public ownership? The answer is ambiguous as both public and private museums suffer from the strains of being under-funded. The Wayside, the Concord, Massachusetts, home of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow are historic homes in public ownership; both are in possession of the federal government under the National Park Service. These homes are the centerpiece of a discussion on the problems concerning federal funding of historic sites and public museums. Private homes discussed here include the Emily Dickinson Homestead and Evergreen House; Orchard House, home of Louisa May and Bronson Alcott; and the House of the Seven Gables, the Salem, Massachusetts, home of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The first major effort to save a historic landmark in the United States occurred in 1853 when the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, organized under Ann Pamela Cunningham, began raising funds to purchase George Washington's home. In 1858 the MVLA was able to acquire Mount Vernon for \$200,000 and save it from demolition. Patriotism spurred early preservation efforts. Andrew Jackson's home—the Hermitage—the site of the first Continental Congress, and Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge were among the sites saved in the 19th century. In 1889 the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities became the first state-wide preservation

organization. In 1910 the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) became the first regional historic preservation organization. In 1949 the National Trust for Historic Preservation became the first national non-profit preservation organization in the United States. Today, roughly half the historic house museums in the U.S. are in the hands of private organizations (Historic Preservation; Barthel 92; Lindgren 4).

The national government did not officially recognize the field of historic preservation until 1935 with the passing of the Historic Sites Act, which created the National Register of Historic Places and placed historic preservation under the Secretary of the Interior. The National Park Service, already nineteen years old, was named warden of historic sites and granted authorization to perform preservation work (Kanawati 27). In 1962 the National Park Service's jurisdiction was expanded to include preservation of literary sites (Sweeting 31). The first literary site purchased by the NPS was Wayside in 1966, followed by the Longfellow house in 1973 (Sweeting 31-32). The national park now holds five literary sites; the others are the California home of Eugene O'Neill, Carl Sandburg's North Carolina residence, and Poe's Seventh Street house in Philadelphia.

Funding most clearly differentiates private and publicly held museums. Private museums are often endowed by private citizens or companies or are owned by a non-profit organization, which also manages the site. The Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association, which maintains the Orchard House museum, is an example. The association was formed in 1911 by the women of Concord. Private museums must do most of their own fundraising. Although private organizations use a wide variety of methods for fundraising, one popular method is holding special events at their site. Many

struggling museums rent out their facilities for weddings and parties to individuals who have no knowledge of caring for historic property. As a result, such organizations often suffer damage to the sites' contents (Kanawati 33-34). While the specific historic sites discussed here do not rent out their facilities for such functions, many do offer a long list of special events with high ticket prices. Orchard House has a full calendar of events throughout the summer months; the motley list of events includes a picnic with a silhouette artist and a cut wool animal art workshop. Such events may not endanger the historic possessions of the house, but can shift the focus from the mission of the museum and muddle the author's legacy.

Another troubling issue with private ownership is the temptation to sell part of the estate to raise funds. Recently, a Quincy, MA, church made \$3 million at auction when the congregation sold off eleven pieces of silver which had been given to them by descendants of Abigail Adams. The Church separated the eleven pieces for maximum profit, making the possibility of ever reuniting the collection nearly impossible (McIntosh 28). In 1950 Alfred Hampson, ward of the Evergreen House, sold the possessions in the house which belonged to Emily Dickinson. Her manuscripts, family portraits, and furniture, including the bureau where Lavinia found her massive collection of poems, were sold off, never to return to the property. The man who purchased the Dickinson collection donated the items to Harvard University, where they are maintained in the Houghton Library. The collection, though preserved, is also permanently separated from the Evergreen House and the Dickinson Homestead, where very few actual possessions of the family remain. According to museum chairwoman Polly Longworth, "There's so little of the family left here" (Biemiller).

Historic homes held in private ownership often suffer the consequences of the owner/endower's agendas and idiosyncrasies. Caroline Emmerton, a SPNEA trustee, purchased the House of the Seven Gables to serve as a settlement house in 1908. Emmerton planned to use profits from admission to the house to support the settlement. She wanted to show tourists a house that more closely resembled the house of Hawthorne's novel and so hired architect Joseph Everett Chandler to install Hezbibah's cent shop and the secret stairwell, which were referenced in the novel, but had never been part of the structure. According to SPNEA founder William Sumner Appleton, Jr., the result showed "the restoration and repairs have not been made with the sole object of archaeological accuracy" (Lindgren 142-143).

Until 1991 when it was turned over to the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust, the Evergreen house was held by Mary Hampson. Hampson refused to allow Polly Longworth, a Dickinson scholar and now Museum Board chair, entry into the home because Hampson associated Longworth, author of *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair*, with what she called the "Todd-Bingham" conspiracy.¹ Hampson also reportedly denied admittance to anyone, including scholars, linked to either Mabel Todd or Amherst College (Biemillar).

Although private historic sites must raise much of their own funding, some also receive grants from government foundations. Grants from the national government are given through the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Institute of Museum and Library Services. State and local governments also distribute grants such as the financial support that Orchard House receives from the

¹ The "Todd-Bingham" conspiracy refers to Mabel Todd—mistress of Austin Dickinson—and to her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham. They published Emily Dickinson's poems after Emily's sister, Lavinia, concluded that her sister-in-law, Sue Dickinson, was being too slow in getting the pieces published.

Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. Competition for grants, however, is stiff, and many smaller museums do not ever see this type of funding (Kanawati 47). While private museums can receive government funding through grants, the NPS is barred from soliciting donations (McIntosh 29).

Publicly held historic properties receive funding from the government. But receiving government money does not mean that the funding is more reliable than in the private sector. Caretakers at publicly owned museums are not necessarily free from worry about financial affairs. Properties under public ownership must contend with changes in the political climate. During the Great Depression, preservation of historic sites thrived because preservation/restoration projects provided employment. By contrast, when the country faced World War II, priorities shifted and governmental acquirement of new sites and focus on its existing properties diminished drastically (Kanawati 27).

Today Park Rangers and supporters of national parks fear the draining of resources to support national security. In 2003 President Bush proposed a plan to outsource up to 70% of NPS positions to the private sector. The plan would have replaced experienced archeologists, curators, and historians with younger, less qualified, and therefore cheaper individuals. Although the plan was stopped by a House of Representatives vote of 362 to 57, rangers still fear that the over 135,000 new government employees hired for homeland security and the rising deficit might once again put their jobs at risk (Wilkinson 32). The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), a National Parks advocacy group, claims the NPS funding levels are not adequate to maintain proper staffing, causing many NPS sites to shorten their operation calendar. In 1995 the Longfellow National Historic Site began closing the home to

visitors for half the year. Today the home is open to the public from June-October. Similarly, the Wayside, home of Hawthorne and the Alcotts, is open to visitors from May-October. The shorter schedule is not due to lack of public interest in the authors. In fact, Hawthorne's other Concord residence, The Old Manse, and the Alcotts' neighboring Orchard House are both open to visitors year round.

The NPCA claims that National Parks need over \$600 million in additional funding to maintain the professional standards of preservation (Kiernan 4). The deficiency of funding severely endangers archives at NPS sites. Many sites do not have enough staff to properly catalog the materials. According to NPS chief curator Ann Hitchcock, only about 40% of parks adequately preserve their collections (O'Connell). In 1994, a team of NPS catalogers uncovered a box labeled "miscellaneous famous people" at the Longfellow site. Included in the box were original letters from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Marquis de Lafayette, which had set uncataloged in NPS ownership for twenty-three years (O'Connell).

Visiting these historic house museums illustrates how the lack of adequate funding affects some museums. A visit to Wayside reveals an exterior in desperate need of repair with faded and chipping paint; the interior is dank and musty, most likely the result of the building's leaky roof. Despite renovations and reconstruction of its gardens, the exterior structure of the Longfellow house is in a state worse than Wayside. In 2006, because of the "decline of exterior elements," the Longfellow house was given the status of *Threatened* by the NPS, which "indicates NHLs [National Historic Landmarks] that have suffered, or are in imminent danger of, a severe loss of integrity" (Longfellow House).

By contrast, a visit to Orchard House, which was a combination of two 18th century houses Bronson Alcott had joined for his family, reveals an exterior in immaculate condition, and a seemingly structurally sound interior despite the haphazard manner of its construction. Guides claim around 75% of the furnishings in the home belonged to the Alcotts. The Old Manse, which was purchased in 1939 by the non-profit Trustees of Reservations, which holds 96 properties in Massachusetts and has a membership of 100,000, appears to be aging remarkably. The museum's possessions and the inscriptions on the windows made by Sophia Hawthorne and Nathaniel Hawthorne are wonderfully preserved. The museum also has a careful reproduction of the garden planted by Henry David Thoreau as a wedding gift for the couple. Whether the condition of the Old Manse is due to funding or the creativity of the museum's staff in protecting the property is unclear. An example of the ingenuity of the staff is the requirement of visitors to wear booties to prevent scratching the floors.

These examples are not meant to indicate that there is superiority in the conditions of privately held homes. Not all privately held house museums are in excellent condition. An example is the Emily Dickinson Homestead. The house was sold in 1916 and modernized before Amherst College purchased the home in 1965 and used it as a faculty residence for many years. Although over \$700,000 was spent on restoration in 2006, the home is still unimpressive to the eye. Its walls are painted in a plain fashion: not covered in the bold wallpaper typical of the period. The home has contemporary area rugs in multiple rooms and even has modern floor lamps to provide additional lighting. The rooms are thinly furnished, and what items are present are admittedly not original to the

family. The home fundamentally lacks an authentic feel, and the staff agrees. “We say the floorplan is the same,” says Museum Director Cindy Dickinson (Biemiller).

These literary house museums of New England are examples that publicly and privately funded museums have discernible differences in operation. Whether the houses benefit most when publicly owned or privately operated remains ambiguous. The differences between publicly and privately owned house museums are not so much matters of how much funding the preservationists receive, but rather what they do with the money. Museum keepers at both privately held and publicly held sites face economic challenges, but what is important is how they answer the challenges.

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