Examination of Museums as Historic Sites

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Abstract

Over the last decade, historic house museums have been the subject of criticism for their outdated interpretative models. Traditionally, they offer tours of the home, yet these events are usually unengaging to contemporary audiences. Museum experts argue this is why museums have fewer visitors. In response to these criticisms, authors have offered interpretative based solutions for nearly a decade. Museum literature has yet to examine whether or not today's house museums are beginning to change. Focusing on a regional level, the purpose of this paper is to research how house museums and historic sites have altered their interpretative planning within the last decade. Three case studies on Indiana house museums and related historic sites suggest that museums are altering how they create exhibitions, educational programming, and community outreach projects. This includes adopting minority perspectives, focusing on hands-on learning, and considering how they are a part of changing communities. While the recorded change is slow, this data will provide evidence of how historic sites are adopting innovative ways to engage with their audiences.

Introduction

For years house museums have been important cultural resources for the towns they serve. However, over the last two decades they have been failing to bring in visitors. Museum experts argue that these museums will continue to perform poorly because they are out of touch with the communities they serve. Experts explain that house museums' interpretive planning, or the manner in which they construct their exhibits and programming, has routinely consisted of unengaging tours of the home and misrepresentations of historic figures. However these museums do remain significant because they offer experiences that many larger museums are unable to. This research examines whether or not Indiana house museums have made efforts to engage with their audiences since the development of these criticisms.

There are significant reasons to bring historic museums and sites into the future. If not functioning as some type of community institution such as a museum, historic buildings may not be open to the public. Furthermore, house museums often serve a rural audience. Without the local house museum, an audience would have to look elsewhere for a community resource. Likewise, interpretations of overlooked subjects such as historic domestic life would be at risk.

My three case studies on historical museums in Indiana suggest that museums have begun updating their interpretative models to fit contemporary audiences. Regionally, museums are becoming increasingly interested in their community legacy while maintaining older interpretative habits. With updated interpretative models, these sites' unique stories and authentic historic spaces will be around for another generation to enjoy.

Literature Review

Introduction to Concepts

Traditionally, the primary objective of a house museum is to recreate the historic home as it was when its original residents lived in it. House museums are generally described as "former private homes" (Graham, 1) that have been reimagined as museums. Being one of the most common types of museums that are housed in historic structures, literature suggests a majority of these museums feature "a guided tour… invit[ing] visitors to imagine themselves as residents of a home at a particular moment" (Graham, 1).

Other museums that fit this criteria include art museums and historical societies that are housed in former libraries, one-room schools, hotels, or even train stations, most famously achieved by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France. For the sake of this particular research project, "historic" will be defined as structures that were built before 1920. It should also be noted that only one of the case studies included in the research will not be a house museum.

Last, it is critical to understand the goal of interpretive planning in museums. Interpretive planning is defined as "the educational blueprint for a museum" (Levy, 43). It is critical for a museum to create a plan for how they want to develop their educational programs, exhibitions, and fundraising. It is also important to understand how the museum will communicate "what the site is about while meeting the needs of the audience" (Levy, 43).

Recent Debates

The majority of literature related to museums housed in historic structures is specifically on historic house museums. Within the last decade, the reliability and relevance of historic house museums has been called into question by several museum scholars and preservationists because of the increasing number of failing house museums. In 2013, Stephanie K. Meeks delivered a speech at a National Trust for Historic Preservation conference arguing that their interpretive plans were causing the falling numbers of visitors. She stated that their traditional interpretative

plans were unengaging and are “a fundamentally unsustainable model” (Meek). Franklin Vagnone, another museum director, shared Meek’s frustration with house museums in his 2016 book *Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums*. Vagonone argued that “visitors are looking for entertaining experiences [and] interactive learning” (13) which is devoid at these museums. Traditionally, the focal point in every house museum has been on the original residents of the home who were primarily wealthy, white homeowners. Contemporary viewers do not find these experiences especially relevant because they are exclusionary. According to Meek, selling a historic site may be equally viable since “a historic house museum may not be the right model for every important place we wish to protect”.

These criticisms of house museums are largely supported by the museum community. House museums can be uncreative and engaging for a contemporary audience. However, these same critics also put faith into the future of these sites. According to a National Trust survey conducted in 1988 “70 percent of all house museums are in rural locations or in places with populations under 50,000” (Graham, 2014). This highlights how an overshadowed audience is being served, a group of people who do not regularly visit larger art museums. Most obviously, walking through a historic structure is an experience most museum officials want to preserve.

Broader Context

The house museum debate of the 2000s and early 2010s has influenced a wave of literature interpreting the history of the house museum. In the first chapter of Foy Donnelly’s book *Interpreting Historic House Museums* Patrick H. Butler III describes how methods of interpretation have largely failed to change. Since the mid 19th century, American preservationists have made efforts to preserve the legacies of historical figures by transforming their homes or places of work into museums. The earliest house museums and historic sites share

a common bond in that they were created so as to maintain "the nation's sense of identity" (Butler, 20) by preserving the homes of the founding fathers. The restoration of Mount Vernon in 1853 by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association marked one of the first successful attempts to establish a house museum. Butler argues that this historic site has been "the primary model for historic preservation efforts over the last century and a half" (Butler, 20). Although influential, the site is held responsible for creating negative interpretive habits in the house museum field. Butler asserts that walking through Washington's rooms as they were in the 18th century is no longer engaging for modern audiences. Patricia West, the author of *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, also reflects on how Mount Vernon's early interpretive strategies would not be satisfactory for a contemporary audience. The Museum's primary intention was to interpret George Washington in a heroic light so "presenting a historically accurate picture of plantation life could not have been further from the Mount Vernon Ladies Association's agenda" (37). This model would not challenge today's audiences to think critically about the past.

The 1930s and 1940s mark another influential milestone for house museums. The establishment of the National Park Service's Park History Program in 1931 was one of many national efforts to link "historic inspiration to the achievement of national goals" (Patricia West, 131). Instilling values in children and using history as an educational tool was becoming increasingly important for the nation. Butler further explains that the federal government used the "experience of historic places in shaping a perception of America's beliefs and traditions." (Butler, 28)

As one of her case studies in *Domesticating History*, Patricia West describes how the Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, the birthplace of African American educator Booker T.

Washington, was created to "court the political loyalty of African-Americans" (136). It was believed that African Americans would not have wanted to fight against a racist Nazi Germany when Jim Crow laws were still plaguing their own nation. In similar fashion to Mount Vernon, the intention of the Historic Site was not to recreate the home in a way that put slavery and the antebellum era at the forefront. Instead, Sidney Phillips, the director of the Site, felt it was necessary to present Booker T. Washington's birthplace as heroic, not as a cabin once home to slaves. Historic sites were often the subject of propaganda, depending on the thoughts and beliefs of the groups who organized them. This model of creating a museum entirely around the accomplishments of an individual is still in use today.

The Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site represents how house museum curators were increasingly interested in developing authentic experiences, but not necessarily authentic environments. As described in Steven Lubar's book *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*, curators such as George Francis Dow were utilizing reproductions of historic objects to provoke an "atmosphere of liveableness", the feeling that the "inhabitants left just moments, not centuries, ago" (Lubar, 217). This only required that the objects looked and felt authentic, not that they actually were. Expanding off of this model, archeologist James Deetz pioneered using "costumed interpreters" who spoke "in the voices of people from the era" (221). The language and culture is the focus, not the objects. Interpreting in this fashion is still common practice in house museums. While these two distinct methods are accepted by experts, sites are continually criticized for solely glorifying an individual or time period. This is problematic because visitors are not encouraged to think critically about history and how their own towns participated in that history. By directly telling a visitor what to think, they are eliminating opportunities for engagement.

New Interpretation Models

It is commonly accepted that house museums have not developed past these interpretative habits. However with waves of literature criticizing the house museum's unprogressive interpretive planning in the 2000s and 2010s, scholars began considering how these historic sites could start making relevant changes. Authors Elizabeth Wood and Kirsten F. Latham acknowledged how museums in general began considering how they can "indicate other ways of knowing objects rather than just 'facts'"(24). Over the last decade, museums have begun giving authority to different perspectives and allowing for multiple interpretations of objects, instead of solely giving facts. According to Lisa Junkin Lopez, house museums have begun a similar transformation; they "are beginning to reimagine [their] sites as active, breathing spaces to engage with both the past and the present" (10).

In her article *Dwelling in Possibility*, Hilary Iris Lowe uses the Emily Dickinson House Museum as an example of how house museums of the 2010s began challenging their visitors to think critically about historical figures and to construct their own opinions about the past. In an exhibit at the Dickinson House, there are poems on the wall with select words that the viewer is able to change. Emily Dickinson famously wrote alternate versions of her poems with minor word changes that alter the meaning of each poem. In this exhibit, the viewer is able to craft their own version of a Dickinson poem by using the alternative words. Authority to decide the meaning of the poems is given to the viewer, not to the museum curator.

The Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum has similarly evolved their interpretive plan to question to the traditionally held beliefs regarding Mark Twain's literary work and the history of slavery in his hometown. According to Rex Ellis's essay "Interpreting the Whole House", this is exactly what museums should be doing. Ellis argues that little known details about a minority

group should not result in silence on the museum's part and that "a museum's staff should study evidence available elsewhere in the region" (67). Silence means ignoring history and potentially blindly glorifying someone. Allowing for multiple interpretations and perspectives is critical if house museums want to continue telling authentic stories. Hillary Lowe contends that it's precisely this ability to have "narrative agility that explains why some literary house museums thrive while some of their historical counterparts languish" (44). These perspectives make museums relevant parts of the community and important for a wider range of audiences.

Summary

Although historic house museums occupy a small section of the museum world, the literature is overwhelmingly focused on house museums. There has yet to be a comprehensive look at the development of how historic buildings have been used as historical societies. Stephanie Meek argues that museum directors should consider "mov[ing] away from the house museum as our 'go to' strategy for preservation" (Meek), yet how does this perspective apply to other structures repurposed into museums? Do they suffer from identical interpretative problems? If not, they may be more reliable models for repurposing an old building.

Additionally, there has yet to be a critical look at how Indiana house museums and other related historic sites have developed in the past decade since these criticisms have appeared. While Hilary Lowe acknowledges the Emily Dickinson House Museum and the Mark Twain Childhood Home & Museum as progressive steps other examples are few and far between. How have Indiana museums made efforts in the past decade to address these criticisms and are they responding the same ways as highlighted by Hilary Lowe, Rex Ellis, and Lisa Junkin Lopez? Also are these museums improving their sites by focusing on similar interpretive methods such including histories of slavery and racism?

Methods Overview

Document Analysis

Many of these questions can be answered by analyzing how museums have changed their interpretative models over the past decade. For this research project, I developed three case studies that examine the exhibits, educational programs, and community outreach projects of three Indiana house museums and one historic site. Document analysis was the most appropriate form of data collection because those who were in charge of their museum's interpretive planning a decade ago usually do not remember all of the decisions were made. Newsletters, online press releases, and curator journals helped me construct a storyboard of how a museum has historically engaged with its community.

Ethics of Research

To guarantee anonymity to each historic site I have given each museum, its corresponding county, and historic figures a pseudonym. I have only had personal contact with one of the museums before I began constructing the case studies. While completing the case studies, I regularly communicated with the museum archivist or director to guarantee that they knew their site would be the subject of research.

Three Case Studies

The first case study examines a history center rather than a house museum. There has yet to be a definitive look at how museums housed in historic buildings other than homes are engaging with their audiences. The Dunlap County History Center is currently housed in a Carnegie Library that was built in 1912. The building served as the community's library until the 1970s when it was reimagined as a history museum. In the 1990s a temperature controlled storage facility, as well as a research library was added onto the historic building.

Another case study was completed on the Evans House Museum, which is owned and operated by a local university in Woodford County. The Museum is historically significant to the university because it was the home of its first president, William Evans. Evans built and designed the home in a Georgian and Federal-style, and lived there from the 1830s to the 1850s. The home was sold to the university in 1947 and was opened to the public in 1965. In 2000, a renovation was completed and an educational center was added to the property.

The third case study was completed at the Nicholas Jefferson Museum Home in Newton County. Newton County is about ten times larger than Dunlap County and Woodford County, which are both categorized as college towns. Nicholas Jefferson was a famous literary figure from Indiana and was widely popular from the decades 1880s to the 1910s. The home is in the Victorian-style and was Jefferson's home late in life up until his death. In 1922 the home was bought by the Jefferson Memorial Association and was repurposed into a museum. In 2013 a visitor center was added to the property.

While these case studies reveal important details about the development of house museums and historic sites over the last decade, there are limitations readers should be aware of. Since the purpose of this research is to examine Hoosier museums, data may not be applicable on a national scale. Furthermore, urban areas in and around south central Indiana are primarily the focus of this project so further examination of rural museums is needed.

Groups of Interpretative Engagement

In order to identify recurring themes in interpretive planning, I have designated five separate groups that represent some form of community engagement. The data measures the effort to engage audiences not whether they succeed. Furthermore, these variables help reveal general patterns between the museums.

Group A encompasses the museum's effort to interpret minority stories, objects, or people. African American artist Fred Wilson articulated this concept perfectly in his *Mining the Museum* exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society. Wilson reinterpreted their exhibit space in a way that addressed African American perspectives. In one instance, Wilson used the wooden chairs used by a wealthy white family in the 1800s to investigate the culture of furniture making by slaves.

Group B refers to a museum's effort to create hands-on learning experiences. How does the museum go beyond using a house tour as the primary way to learn about the house?

Group C refers to when museums seek out partnerships with local organizations and businesses. A significant part of community engagement means participating in the community through its leaders and organizations.

Group D includes interpretative efforts that go beyond random facts about historic figures. These efforts present why the home's history is important to the town's legacy and beyond.

Last, Group E functions as a none of the above group. If a museum's interpretative effort falls into this group then there is a strong chance the museum is not trying to go beyond traditional museum interpretation.

Findings

According to the results of my three case studies, house museums and related historic sites in Indiana have been progressively updating their interpretative models. By comparing each museum's past interpretative efforts to its most recent exhibits and educational programming, I have been able to define whether or not change is occurring and how it is occurring. Using the grouping method I previously described, I have extracted data on whether or not historic sites

have made efforts to incorporate minority perspectives, adapt to hands-on learning, form community partnerships, and update their organizational legacy.

Have Museums Responded to Literature?

GROUP A: Incorporating Minority Perspectives

There has been a strong push by museum experts to begin including minority perspectives at historic sites. While minimal, Indiana museums have begun making up for the exclusion of minority voices at historic sites within the last decade. The Evans House Museum and the Nicholas Jefferson Museum Home were both once home to white families so interpretation seldomly involved the lives of outside a European American experience. While the Jefferson Museum Home has made little to no effort in recent years, the Evans House Museum has offered exhibits and programming that concentrates on the lives of African Americans, Native Americans, and potentially LGBTQ+ residents who were related to the home.

Before the 2010s, the Evans House Museum devoted very little time expounding on the stories of the African American residents and the fact that the home was on Native American land. It was not until 2017 that a Black History Month exhibit was curated to flesh out the lives of the African American housekeeper and the young African American man who would become the local university's first black student to graduate. The exhibit was extremely factual and focused on their lives connected to the home as well as their personal lives. Additionally, it notes how the community itself related to black history by describing how a local church was created by Christians who left the south for Indiana.

The Evans House made even more progress in this domain with the start of the new decade. In 2020 the Evans House hosted an artist workshop that invited six contemporary artists to create their own exhibits in the house that "will enhance the museum's efforts to broaden and

strengthen its historical interpretation beyond the lives of" (Call and Response Powerpoint Presentation) the local university's presidents, the main interpretative subjects of the House. The artists were asked to think about the lives of those who have been historically overlooked. One of the African American artists constructed an exhibit examining the black housekeeper in relation to "themes such as mythologizing the role of black women, Black girls having to grow up quickly, and keeping women of color hidden endure in our culture today" (Art Acquisition Summary Report). The artist's own artwork was seamlessly integrated into the home so that the viewers were encouraged to consider how the housekeeper was the victim of this same "mythologizing". Another exhibit acknowledged how Miami Native Americans were forced to relocate to Oklahoma by creating ledger art of the family names that were victims of the removal. Similar to the previous exhibit, the ledger art was framed in a vintage frame that matched the home's early 18th century setting. Furthermore, one of the Home's current digital exhibits involves the interpretation of one of the Evans children's relationship with a famous LGBTQ+ poet in the early 1900s. While the exhibit is more of an historic explanation of how two young girls met and formed a friendship, it acknowledges the possibility that these two could have had a romantic relationship.

The artist workshop and exhibit is an excellent example of how a traditional interpretive model is adapted to a contemporary audience. According to a summary report on the workshop, the exhibits were adapted into the house tour. While on the tour, visitors were encouraged to consider the history of racial injustice in the community. The Dunlap History Center has also made an effort to address the legacy of racism in their town.

Again, before the 2010s very little communicated that the History Center was interested in telling minority stories. Although the Center has regularly created exhibits around women's

history since their opening in 1979, it was not until the late 2010s that they began expounding on African American history in their community. In 2017, a dedication ceremony was held at the Center for a historic marker. The outdoor sign which had explained the history of the African American school that sat on the site before the library was built, was the recent target of "racist-inspired vandalism" (Streetman). The Center invited a professor from the local university and the president of the local NAACP chapter to speak at the rededication ceremony. This gave the guests an opportunity to lecture about the history of segregation and how it still influenced the town in the 21st century. Furthermore, in 2019 an exhibit was installed that featured the men and women of color who had served the community as ex-police officers, firefighters, and nurses. The exhibit often featured quotations from these community helpers explaining how it was difficult being the first black American in their field at the time.

Equally insightful was a women's history exhibit organized in conjunction with the 2020 presidential election. The exhibit features biographies of local women who campaigned for women's suffrage. The curator noted that "the goal of the suffrage exhibit [was] to really illustrate that individuals in our community can and have improved our community" (Rollins). Along with the exhibit, educational programming was developed so that young people could gain an understanding of democracy and the right to vote. This exhibit uses the history of suppressed people as a way to encourage people living in the 21st century to consider how they want to inspire change in their community. These types of efforts make history relevant to visitors. According to these case studies, more of these efforts should be expected in the future.

GROUP B: Hands-On Learning

The History Center has also been progressive with how they have created opportunities for engagement that go beyond simply looking and reading. Naturally, these types of activities

are usually well suited for children and this is apparent at the History Center. As early as 1980, only one year after they had opened to the public, the Center began experimenting with hands-on activities with their exhibit *Play it Again, Teddy*. The exhibit was curated around vintage teddy bears. Children were encouraged to bring their own teddy bears so that it could be repaired by a "Teddy Bear Nurse". Children were invited to share their stories about their bears and even put it into a contest so that it could have a chance to be displayed at the Center. The 2006 exhibit *Toys and Games from Yesteryear* seemed just as entertaining for children. This exhibit was a display of vintage toys, but one's own children could play and interact with. Playing I Spy with a 1940s dollhouse and participating in a vote for your favorite toy in the Toy Hall of Fame were a few of the many engaging activities for children.

As of recently, the Center began creating experiences that are physically engaging for adults. In 2019 the Center launched a series of educational programs that helped dementia patients recall memories through the use of historical objects. The Center's director noted that "one in two adults over the age of 80 have some form of [dementia]" (Service) so it is critical that these programs exist. Their partnership with an Alzheimer's resource center has made the Center able to create specialized guided tours through the museum and activities that place historic objects in the hands of the patients. The education manager wrote that dancing, watching old television series, and tasting vintage candy is an important step in making connections with memories. What is most surprising about these programs is how early the Center began implementing them. While the Center has continued to engage children and adults alike in the 21st century, their early efforts should not be overlooked.

In recent years, the Jefferson Museum Home has reached out to their community through student focused programming. Beginning in 2014, the Home constructed writing workshops and

educational tours for grades ranging from 1st to 12th grade that “address specific Indiana state education standards” (Jefferson). One of the workshops was created as a English Language Arts lesson and involved the students in Jefferson’s work by having them act as news reporters as they toured the museum. Their objective is to create a news report that argues whether they would rather live in the present or during the 19th century. The tour guide, an actor playing Nicholas Jefferson, answers the student’s questions and gives explanations of what his own life was like during the Victorian era. Furthermore, a creative writing summer camp was created in 2019 that offered similar experiences to students out of school.

These are exciting examples of how historic museums can make their historic subjects palpable for young, contemporary audiences. This is much more engaging than simply being in a classroom or receiving a generalized tour rather than an age focused one. Until 2014, the Museum Home used the same general tour script since their opening in 1922. The script reveals that the tour primarily interpreted the furnishings of the home and basic Victorian facts. For instance, the tour guide was required to point out that the housekeeper was required to use a separate door from the guests and residents. Admirably, the entire house and its furnishings, except the kitchen, is “the actual taste of a Victorian family, not a modern day interpretation.” (9). However, the script would fail to engage a contemporary audience because it does not encourage participation in interpreting Victorian culture and Jefferson’s career. Most of the experience is listening to facts about Jefferson’s life and how the furniture was commonplace in Victorian homes. The educational tours created in 2014 do a more effective job at making this an engaging and participatory experience.

GROUP C: Community Partnerships

The Evans House Museum has done an exceptionally good job with community engagement through partnerships and collaborations with organizations and community leaders. As far back as the early 1990s, the Evans House has used its relationship with the local university to create connections with the community. In 1991, the Evans House partnered with the university's music school by giving harp students a performance space for their recital. According to the recital notes, students enjoyed performing in the historic home and the director even noted that the event brought new people to the Home. The 2006 exhibit *Swinging Sisters: All-Girl Big Bands of the 1940s* also featured a partnership with the music school. A college and high school jazz combo was invited to lead an improvisation workshop. Additionally, authors and jazz musicians Patricia Wolff and Stanley Kay were invited to speak at the event. Although the director of the museum was expecting senior citizens to be the primary audience, young musicians were attracted as well. The Evans House has clearly been aware of how collaborations are effective forms of community engagement.

The Evans House Museums has continued to form partnerships with local businesses within the last decade. One of the Museum's longest running events, their Christmas open house, has given them opportunities to further develop community connections. Stretching back to the 1980s, every December the museum staff decorates the house in historically accurate Christmas decor and invites the community to enjoy tours of the home, Christmas carols, and treats, also specific to the 19th century. Partnerships with the music school's early music institute, high school choir, and a local wholefood store have made entertainment livelier and catering easier within the last decade. Beginning in 2019, the Evans House has also collaborated with local archeology students to explore how the home's garden looked like in the 19th century. Students helped identify what types of native and non-native plants were planted around the house. These

community efforts have made the Museum important to several groups of people. Since the Evans House was founded by a university, collaborations between students and facility were much easier to facilitate in comparison to other museums.

GROUP D: A Museum's Community Legacy

These interpretative efforts indicate that these museums are beginning to change how they look at themselves as organizations within their communities. The Evans House Museum has been positioning itself as an educational institution that is just as involved with their community legacy as it is with the Evans family. The housekeeper, gardens, and property itself has become the subject of interpretation in relation to the town's contemporary culture. At an early board meeting in 1951, the organizers stated that the main interpretative plan should be "to depict in detail how a scholar of the 1830s lived, worked and entertained" (Wells). The Evans Home has created a new standard for their interpretative model and this is likely due to it being owned by a state university.

Since the Nicholas Jefferson Museum Home is owned by a children's foundation, their legacy as a community organization is unlike the other museums. They are less critical of history and use their home as an extended classroom for young students to learn about Victorian culture and Nicholas Jefferson. English language arts and social studies seem to be a large focus of the site. There is still progress to be made, because their current interpretative planning only coincides with school years. The rest of the year they rely on their status as "the country's only true preservation of a late Victorian era home that is open to the public" (Jefferson).

In recent years, the History Center has projected itself as a museum for and by the community. In the past two decades, they have offered exhibits, programming, and a research

facility that creates a community identity and helps people connect with that identity. In 2000, the Center's director wrote that "while aesthetically pleasing, [the exhibits] have been less than inspirational" and expressed his hope that the upcoming Democracy exhibit would help "illustrate to youngsters the impact of opening voting to women" (Hoosierisms Quarterly, "Monroe County Museum). This exact exhibit was reimagined in 2020 as *Votes for Women: The Women's Suffrage Movement* and showcases how the Center has updated their communication with the public. Although not a house museum, it shows how historic sites can exist outside of homes. The old library has continued as an important cultural and educational center.

Modern Additions to Historic Structures

In order to accomplish many of these interpretative challenges, museums have added on modern-day additions, such as a research facility or visitor center to their historic site. This has become a common approach by regional museums. In 1997, the Dunlap County History Center added 12,000 square feet to their building so that they could host a genealogy research library and an education room. The genealogy research library is commonly used as a method of engagement by the History Center. Their website notes that they "serve genealogists, local historians, and anyone who loves learning about their family and community history".

The Evans House Museum transported a barn onto their property and created the Charles C. Reckard Education Center in 2010. Interestingly, the barn resembles a 19th century barn that was similar in style to the barn that originally sat on the property. As a way to supplement the historic house tours, the building acts as an "educational center targeted for children, exhibition space," and a meeting facility for staff according to the local university's capital planning and facilities webpage. In similar fashion, a visitor center was added to the Nicholas Jefferson

Museum Home's campus in 2013. The center was modeled after the carriage house that once neighbored the historic home in the 19th century. The structure was created so that visitors could "view videos about Mr. Riley and participate in educational activities". These new spaces were created as ways to bypass the obstacles of interpreting in historic buildings. This further suggests that regionally museums have changed how they engage their communities.

The Moments Museums Failed

Indiana historic sites have been progressively adapting the interpretative strategies outlined in museum literature while also maintaining their traditional interpretative habits. These museums often host special events that qualify as advancements, yet their typical exhibits or programming do not. As previously mentioned, the Jefferson House Museum does very little interpretatively during months when students are out of school. The general audience is not challenged as students are in their writing workshops. A 2014 newsletter welcomes readers "as you enjoy your summer days, we encourage you to visit the Riley Museum Home and reminisce about the simpler times when a summer afternoon meant 'a lazy breeze' and 'the twitter, sometimes, of a wayward bird'" (Jefferson). Audiences are not expected to think critically about the Victorian era. The Evans House Museum hosted a quilt exhibit in 2016 that showcased historic quilts, yet did not interpret the objects beyond historic facts about the quilt designs. Furthermore, as of 2020, on-site programming and exhibits have been discontinued because of the global pandemic. While museums have made efforts to update their websites and digital presence, the Jefferson Museum Home still lacks a comprehensive website. The virus has made it even more difficult to create meaningful programming for audiences.

There have been significant efforts to tell their stories through digital platforms. The Jefferson Museum Home and the Evans House Museum has developed virtual tours of the home

so that visitors are able to experience the historic homes from their own homes. Interestingly, the Evans House and the Dunlap History Center has created virtual renderings of their respective buildings so that visitors could digitally navigate through the sites at their own pace. These two tours are accessible through their websites as well as digital exhibits and blog posts. The Evans House Museum includes further reading on the new university presidents who lived in the home, which includes digitized letters and pictures of objects related to the men. The History Center regularly creates blog posts about research conducted at the Center, as well as interesting objects from their collection. The Nicholas Jefferson Museum Home uses their Facebook page to also tell interesting stories about Jefferson, as well as showcase interesting objects from the home.

Conclusion and Further Questions

It has been over a decade since house museums have been heavily criticized for using outdated interpretative models. Fortunately, there has been notable progress in altering how house museums have created content for the public. The ways in which they have developed has largely depended upon their identity within their communities. While there have been several interpretative strategies recommended by authors, each museum chose only the methods of learning best suited their organization. The Jefferson Museum Home chose to do little to no interpretation of racism in the Victorian era presumably because they are owned by a children's foundation. While this should not excuse the site from avoiding the subject altogether, they instead focused their efforts on creating educational workshops.

Since these organizations have been cultural resources in their communities for several decades, there are traditions that they are expected to follow. The History Center’s very first exhibit was a quilt exhibit organized in 1979. Now on an annual basis an identical quilt exhibit is

displayed despite changes in audience taste and entertainment. While historic sites that are other than house museums have proven to be progressive, they too occasionally suffer from using traditional interpretative plans. Furthermore, both the Evans House Museum and the Jefferson Museum maintain tours of the home, because they expect the primary reason people come to the home is for the tours. Their long standings in the community creates ingrained expectations. This explains why amidst strong, forward looking experiences these museums have old fashioned exhibits and programming.

Historic sites may be able to benefit by following the lead of museums who are always rotating exhibits and altering how they engage the public. While the three case studies have made efforts, they have not used the same innovative strategies used by other museums. Programming designed for human computer interaction such as augmented reality and virtual reality has been noticeably absent from these sites. None of the sites have their collection digitally accessible either. Furthermore, experiences that are translatable to social media have not been utilized. Many young visitors want to share their experiences at these sites with friends through social media, yet these exhibits do not invite that type of behavior.

While the data indicates that there have been efforts by museums to improve their interpretative models, further research is needed to determine whether or not these organizations have a future in the 21st century. It would be beneficial to know whether or not visitor numbers were beginning to increase during the most recent decade. This research would prove whether or not contemporary audiences currently view house museums and historic sites as relevant. Furthermore, as literature on how to adapt to the constraints of the virus is created, it will be important to research whether or not historic sites will continue to respond to the proposed

solutions. House museums may be able to leverage themselves out of their status as outdated sites if they continue adapting to modern interpretative strategies.

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