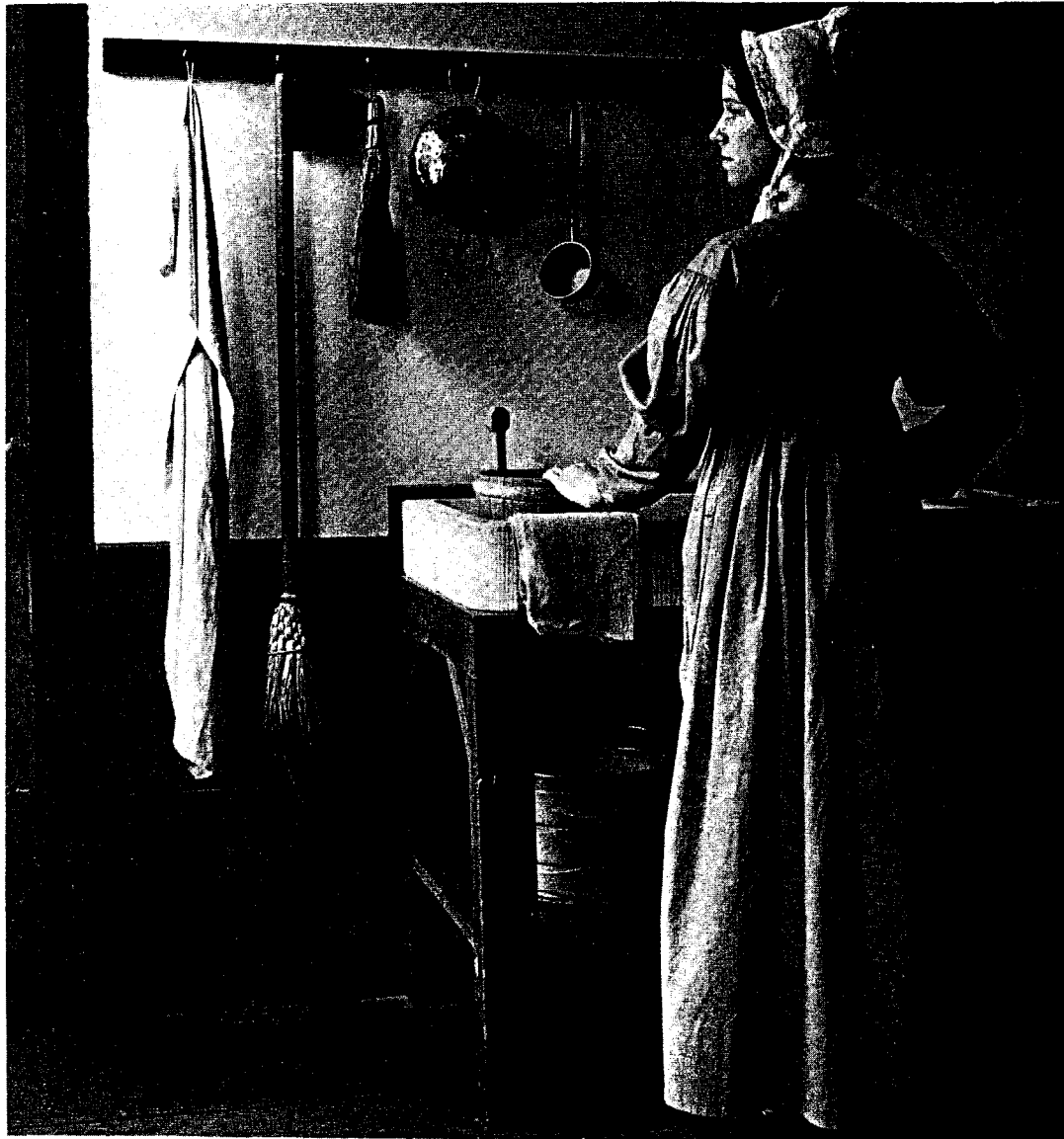


Costumed interpreter at dry stone sink, Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Massachusetts



Edward Alexander, *Museums in Motion*
(Nashville, 1979), ch. 5: "The History Museum"
pp. 79-95

Since classical days, humankind has taken some interest in the past and gradually has learned to separate myth from actual happening. The history museum, however, has been slow to develop, probably because historians, preoccupied with their exploration of written evidence, have taken little interest in objects and have left them to the attention of antiquarians. Today, history museums are collecting and preserving three-dimensional objects of the past and using them to convey historical perspective and inspiration as well as a sense of what it was like to live in other ages. These objects supplement literary and oral records and thus are revealing documents for the historian, if he will only learn to use them.

Museum Jovianum

The history museum developed more recently than those devoted to art and science. It was, at first, a spin-off from the art collection. Paolo Giovio, bishop, humanist, and scholar, was the best-known of the early collectors of likenesses of famous men. At his residence in Como about 1520, he began to assemble 280 portraits in four categories—deceased poets and scholars, living poets and scholars, artists, and political leaders, including military commanders, statesmen, popes, and monarchs. The living members of this cult of glory were represented by portraits painted from life (Hernando Cortez, for example, hastened to send Giovio his likeness), but the others by busts one and one-half feet high painted on canvas and based upon what sources Giovio could find. The Museum Jovianum (Giovio revived and brought into general use the word *museum*) was considered one of the marvels of the age, and when Giovio died, Cosimo de Medici sent Christofano dell' Altissimo to Como to make copies of its portraits for the Medici collection in Florence. Even more important in keeping alive the idea of this type of historical collection were the books of engravings of the portraits that appeared in Florence (1551), Paris (1552), and Basel (1557).¹

This kind of history museum became enormously popular with noble and wealthy collectors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Catherine de Medici, wife of the French Dauphin (later Henri II), in her Paris residence had 551 portrait drawings, many of them set in paneled walls. Her Enamel Cabinet paired 32 portraits with 32 Limoges enamels, and her Mirror Cabinet contained another 83 portraits mounted with 119 Venetian looking glasses.² Paul Ardiere, lawyer and secretary of defense,

filled a long gallery of his Chateau de Beauregard in the Loire Valley with 363 portraits disposed by reigns around each king of France; his collection can still be viewed in the chateau today. Bussy-Rabutin, soldier and philanderer, exiled to his chateau in Burgundy, developed a museum of historical portraits that included a rotunda exhibiting likenesses of the beautiful women of court; the collector boasted that he had slept with most of them. The Gonzagas had a special room, about 1600, containing likenesses of "the most beautiful women in the world," and Catherine the Great later bought such a "Cabinet of Muses and Graces" for her Peterhof palace.³

The concept of the Museum Jovianum may have appealed to antiquarians, but rows of portraits, often uniform in size, did not constitute an exciting exhibition technique. Nevertheless, it had American versions. Du Simitière's small museum at Philadelphia in 1782 exhibited many of his drawings of Revolutionary military leaders and statesmen; some of his works were engraved and published in French, Spanish, and English editions. Peale's Philadelphia Museum displayed 269 portraits and paintings, most of them by Peale and his family and of Revolutionary leaders and Founding Fathers. From 1817 until his death in 1834, John H. I. Browere sought unsuccessfully to establish a National Gallery by modeling busts of famous Americans, most of their faces delineated from life masks made by a secret process of applying thin coats of quick-drying grout to the greased subject. Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, John and John Quincy Adams, James and Dolley Madison, Monroe, Van Buren, and Clay are some of the 23 busts or masks that have survived, most of them at the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown. The early American historical societies also collected portraits, and as late as the 1850s Lyman Copeland Draper of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin was forming a frontier historical art gallery composed chiefly of portraits of pioneers and Indians; he thought "the noblest aim of Art . . . the illustration or perpetuation of great events in history." Many of the Peale portraits, together with others of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, are shown today by the National Park Service in the old Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia, while the National Portrait Gallery (1962) of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington is fast becoming a great American Museum Jovianum.⁴

Battle Galleries

As the nationalistic spirit burgeoned in Europe, the history museum began to contain other materials. About 1630, Philip IV of Spain

commissioned Rubens to decorate a reception room in his palace, El Retiro, near Madrid, with wall paintings showing twelve great Spanish victories.⁵ Napoleon had similar ambitions, but it remained for Louis-Philippe, the Citizen King, to establish the Historical Museum at Versailles in 1837. It had something to inspire every Frenchman. The Gallery of Battles, four hundred feet long, held thirty-three huge paintings that depicted many of Napoleon's victories. The Hall of 1830 glorified the peasants who constructed barricades during that uprising, while the Hall of Crusades complimented the old aristocracy. Later, gigantic paintings were added on the conquest of Algeria, the Crimean and Italian campaigns, and the Franco-Prussian War. The museum consciously sought to instill a love for glory in young Frenchmen; this patriotism perhaps paid off in 1914. Vienna's Museum of National Glories, established in 1850 in reaction against the 1848 uprising, had a Salon of Honor with fifty-six statues of famous Austrians. Rebuilt after World War II, it contains military equipment and recalls the great wars waged by Austria through the ages.⁶ Many other museums in eastern Europe today have sections devoted to military history and the glories of communist uprisings with paintings, enlarged photographs, and newspaper clippings.

The idea of the museum of national glory has not been widely adopted in the United States. The four large murals of Confederate heroes and battle scenes by the French painter, Charles Hoffbauer, in Battle Abbey of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, constitute a minor exception.⁷ Gutzon Borglum's gigantic sculptural group of Lee and other Confederate generals at Stone Mountain, Georgia, is somewhat similar in concept.

This kind of museum has several weaknesses. Battle paintings are seldom accurate in their details and certainly romanticize warfare. They also take up an inordinate amount of space and constitute a static display. The odor of propaganda clings to them always; whether overlarge and overbright as paintings or monotonous and flat as photographs, documents, and newspaper extracts, they often lack human interest.

Panorama Craze

A specialized form of the history museum employed the panorama or cyclorama—a huge circular painting of a battle or other extensive scene with the observer placed at the center and, sometimes, three-dimensional objects in the foreground. The painting often was housed in a rotunda and lighted from above. Robert Barker, a young Edinburgh

painter in prison for debt, conceived the idea of the panorama and at London in 1792 exhibited one, of the English fleet anchored between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. A panorama craze developed in both Europe and America. In 1823 Louis J. M. Daguerre and Charles Marie Bouton invented the diorama (not our present-day miniature modeled group); by painting on translucent gauze and using moving lights, they could give an impression of movement and changing scenes. No more spectacular panorama ever existed than Colonel Jean-Charles Langlois's *Battle of Navarino*, shown in the Champs Elysées Rotunda in 1830. One entered between-decks of a fighting ship and came out on the poop deck to view the conflict. Wax representations of maimed and dying sailors and realistic sound supplied by hidden men heightened the effect. Cadets entering the Naval Academy of Brest, when taken to see the panorama, were considered to have experienced what it was like to be aboard a warship during battle.⁸

The true panorama reached New York in 1797 with a complete view of London 20 feet high and nearly 130 feet in circumference. Yet as early as 1784 Charles Willson Peale had shown in his Philadelphia residence a primitive type of small moving pictures entitled "Perspective Views with Changeable Effects; or, Nature Delineated and in Motion." An assistant with screens and lights made the scenes appear to move, and they were accompanied by sound effects. The system had been invented by Philippe de Loutherbourg in London in 1781, and Peale spent eighteen months perfecting a two-hour program that included portrayals of Walnut Street at dawn and at nightfall; a view of hell itself, its evil mood enhanced by appropriate music; and the naval battle between *Le Bonhomme Richard* and *Serapis*. Peale charged one shilling, or twenty-five cents, for his moving pictures, and during the summer of 1787 the delegates to the Constitutional Convention were amazed and entertained by the show. American artists continued to experiment with such art forms for nearly a century. In 1849 Henry Lewis completed a panorama of the Mississippi River from Saint Paul to New Orleans; it was 1,975 feet long and unrolled from one creaking upright spool to another amid the spiel of an interpreter and musical accompaniment. Two panoramas of the 1880s are still to be seen in the United States today—*Pickett's Charge*, by the Frenchman Philippoteaux at Gettysburg National Historical Park, and the *Battle of Atlanta*, painted by German artists in Milwaukee, at the Cyclorama in Atlanta.⁹

Historic Preservation

The French Revolution not only opened the Louvre and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle as museums for the people, but also in 1795 created a Muséum des Monuments Français in the Convent of the Petits Augustins. The painter Alexander Lenoir, its founder and director, placed there many architectural and sculptural elements from confiscated churches and palaces. Separate rooms were devoted to each century, beginning with the thirteenth, and an "Elysian Field" had tombs recalling great men such as Descartes, Molière, and La Fontaine. For Héloïse and Abelard, there was a romantic monument. The historian Jules Michelet decried the museum's dissolution in 1816 and said: "It was there and no other place that I felt a keen intuition of history."¹⁰

The attempt to use historical structures as a means of stimulating national pride and giving psychological stability to a government in power also expressed itself in the field of historic preservation. Louis-Philippe and his historian Minister of Interior Guizot established the service of Monuments Historiques in 1830. Brilliantly led by Prosper Mérimée, man of letters and later author of *Colomba* and *Carmen*, and by the architect Viollet-le-Duc, the French government began to inventory historic monuments and to classify them. Buildings of historic or aesthetic importance, even when privately owned, were placed under government protection to prevent their destruction and to control any exterior modification. Viollet-le-Duc also developed the concept and techniques of restoration; though sometimes he has been criticized for overrestoring and going beyond the bounds of strict historical authenticity, he saved hundreds of precious chateaux, churches, and other monuments.

These survivals of the past often became virtual history museums. Thus, when Henry James visited Carcassonne, the ancient fortified town near the Spanish border, about 1880, he could walk around the great double wall, its gray towers contrasting with the green grass of the filled-in moat, and imagine its busy life under the Romans, Visigoths, and medieval French. A lively little custodian led a small group that included James about the old Cité. For an hour, they passed along battlements, ascended and descended towers, crowded under arches, lowered themselves into dungeons, and "halted in all sorts of tight places while the purpose of something or other was described." The custodian also sold James a guidebook written by Viollet-le-Duc himself, as well as a set of post cards.¹¹

Open-Air or Outdoor Museums

The historic preservation movement in France expressed that nation's respect for its heritage of ancient buildings. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, while that feeling was at its flood, to the north the Scandinavians developed another form of cultural self-esteem. As a result, they gave the world a new kind of museum devoted to folk culture, ethnography, and social history. Artur Hazelius of Stockholm was father of the idea.

Hazelius was distressed to see the Industrial Revolution threaten the pleasant, coherent, and distinctive ways of living found in the different regions of Sweden and, indeed, all Scandinavia. He determined to collect and preserve the furniture, furnishings, implements, costumes, and paintings of the old days. In 1873 he opened in Stockholm his Museum of Scandinavian Folklore (later called Nordiska Museet). As his collection grew, he was offered entire buildings and other materials too bulky to show indoors. The result was that he acquired seventy-five acres on a rocky bluff at an old fortification (Skansen) overlooking Stockholm Harbor and started an open-air or outdoor museum there in 1891.

A few attempts at outdoor museums with a strong ethnographic flavor preceded Hazelius's Skansen. The Paris World's Fair of 1889 had shown members of twelve African tribes, as well as Javanese, Tonkinese, Chinese, and Japanese living in native houses, wearing native costumes, eating native food, practicing native arts and rites, and playing native music. (The World Exhibition of 1958 at Brussels had Congolese living in a typical village, but the spectators threw peanuts and bananas at them so that they returned home in disgust.) A Colonial Exhibition at Amsterdam in 1883 displayed an Indonesian *Kampong*, and, two years later, this outdoor village was given to the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde at Leiden, where it attracted large crowds before damage from the harsh winters led to its closing in 1891.

Skansen's framework was its old buildings moved from various parts of Scandinavia—today, some 120 structures dating from medieval times to the twentieth century that include farm houses, a manor house, barns, outbuildings, cottages, shops, a church, and craftsmen's workshops. Hazelius and his successors added attractive gardens and typical farm crops to set off the buildings, as well as authentic furniture and furnishings for the interiors. Guides in the costumes of another day interpreted the culture, traditions, and life of the former inhabitants. Wherever possible, historically correct or appropriate modern activity went on. Divine services and numerous weddings used the eighteenth-

century wooden church from Seglora. Musicians played and sang the old melodies, and folk dancers traced ancient steps with vigor. Glassblowers and other craftsmen made traditional products by hand; animals, domestic and exotic, enlivened the park; orchestras and the best musicians of Europe performed in an outdoor auditorium; an excellent theater presented Shakespeare, Selma Lagerlöf's comedies, and other favorite plays; and restaurants and bars served period food and catered to every taste. To this living museum now come more than two million visitors each year.

Hazelius was trying to use the idea of heritage and understanding of the past as a steadying influence in the face of the violent changes of modern life. He offered a new approach in museum exhibition, for he wished "to place the historical objects in their functional context . . . against the background of their entire cultural environment." He recreated the life of older periods, stimulating the sensory perceptions of the visitors and giving them a memorable experience. As they walked about the carefully restored environment of another day, their thoughts and emotions helped bring the place to life. "Hazelius's achievement," says Iorwerth C. Peate, sometime director of the Welsh Folk Museum, "was that of taking a sudden leap in museum technique and so transforming the museum from a curiosity shop into a home of national inspiration."

Hazelius's museum idea inspired other Scandinavian versions. Bernhard Olsen, former director of the Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen, saw Hazelius's period tableaux in 1878 at the world's fair in Paris. He organized folk collections that became part of the Danish National Museum and in 1901 opened Frilandsmuseet that now has more than thirty-eight farmhouses, barns, cottages, craft shops, and wind and water mills situated in a lush ninety-acre rural park about eight miles from Copenhagen. Dr. Anders Sandvig, a dentist of Lillehammer in Norway, was so indignant at seeing five wagonloads of furniture and furnishings of the region on their way to Hazelius in Stockholm that he began collecting folk materials. They were finally placed in 1904 at Maihaugen (May Hill), where the Norwegian National Day was observed every May 17. Lillehammer's Sandvig Collection at Maihaugen is one of the loveliest outdoor museums clustered about five lakes and including a tiny log cabin (about 1440), the Garmo Stave Church (begun in the early twelfth century), an eighteenth-century farm estate, *Seters* or summer farm buildings from the mountains, and some fifty workshops. Dr. Hans Aal founded the Norsk Folkemuseum at Oslo, which in 1902 moved to Bygdøy, a peninsula extending into Oslo Harbor. Its Stave Church from

Gol dates from 1200. Peter Holm, a charismatic schoolteacher, established *Den Gamle By* (the Old Town) at Aarhus in Jutland in northern Denmark in 1909. Its emphasis is on the folk life of a town instead of a peasant community.

The outdoor museum has since spread around the world, and its influence seems to be constantly increasing. Some scholars regard it chiefly as a folk museum or ethnographic park, but separating folklore and ethnography from social history is a difficult task. Most American outdoor museums consider themselves history museums and try to include political, economic, and social history in their offerings. Everyone agrees that the outdoor museum was "more than a new idea of museum arrangement," more than combining the pleasant atmosphere of the picnic with the serious museum visit. Its most important contribution "was the conception that the greatness of a country, the strength of its industries, the beauty of its art, have firm roots in that country's own history."¹²

Culture History Arrangement

Still another ancestor of the history museum was the museum of industrial or decorative arts. After the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, the South Kensington Museum was founded with industrial and decorative art from the Crystal Palace. Its exhibits were organized under the technical classification system, by which ceramics, glassware, metalwork, enamels, and the like were placed together, often in separate rooms, arranged chronologically or by patterns. Nearly everything was on display (today we call this system "visible storage"). This kind of exhibit may have satisfied scholars intent upon examining large numbers of examples and craftsmen looking for sources of inspiration for their own work, but crowded paintings on walls and heavy glass cases crammed with objects bored and repelled the general public.

A group of German museum curators conceived a new arrangement for such material. The Germanisches Museum at Nuremberg in 1856 purchased an old Carthusian monastery and installed there six original rooms ranging from one of a Tyrolean peasant (fifteenth century) to those of Nuremberg patricians (seventeenth century). By 1888 the museum had many such rooms following this culture history arrangement, so that one could imagine that he was walking through several centuries of German history. At the turn of the century, the Swiss Landesmuseum in Zurich was showing sixty-two such rooms, and the Bavarian Museum in Munich, seventy-six period galleries and rooms.

The culture-history arrangement placed too heavy a burden on museum collections, which could not furnish all the materials needed and thus sometimes resorted to conjectural reproductions. Historical period rooms were excellent in providing a unity of vision and arranging hundreds of objects in a functional, easily understood whole; on the other hand, they did not allow small individual pieces to be inspected closely and compared easily. The best arrangement, museum curators agree today, is to have some period rooms, some exhibits with a suggestive historical background, and still others with objects arranged chronologically or stylistically in separate groups or cases so that they may be examined minutely.¹³

American Historical Societies

The historical society has been a staunch backer of the history museum in the United States. The founders of the first societies—Massachusetts Historical Society (1791) at Boston, New-York Historical Society (1804), and American Antiquarian Society (1812) at Worcester—were driven by zeal for learning and love of country. As true disciples of the Enlightenment, they had unlimited faith in the power of knowledge and reason. They also were determined to preserve the, to them, thrilling story of their defeat of the powerful British empire and to point out the factors that caused the American genius for self-government to flower.

With their broad aspirations and enthusiastic energy, the early historical societies often embarked upon programs too ambitious and too widely dispersed. Thus the New-York Historical Society collected animal, vegetable, and mineral specimens; productions of "the American Continent and the adjacent Islands"; coins and medals; European old-master paintings; artifacts of the Plains and South American Indians; Nineveh sculptures; Egyptian rarities, including three large mummies of the sacred bull Apis; as well as documents, paintings, and objects of New York origin and interest. Eventually, the society narrowed its field of collection to New York and began to dispose of much of the extraneous material.

By 1876, the centennial of American independence, seventy-eight historical societies were counted in the country, about half of them with museums. Today there are some five thousand societies with the same ratio of museums. Some of the earliest societies, for example, Massachusetts and the American Antiquarian, had limited membership; still, the general trend has been to admit anyone with the proper interest and willingness to pay dues. The earliest societies were all entirely

private in finance and control, but starting in the 1850s Wisconsin and others in the Midwest received state appropriations. Their ideal has become to serve everyone in the state, and programs have broadened; the imaginative efforts of Reuben Gold Thwaites of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to reach both learned and popular audiences well illustrate this development. Many societies no longer limit themselves to the scholarly activities of library, research, and publication; instead they now also promote museums, the marking of historic sites, historic preservation, school tours and clubs, and a host of other programs appealing to all ages. Their central indoor museums often have expanded to include a chain of historic houses, preservation projects, and outdoor museums. As part of its central function, the historical society sometimes institutes educational, cultural, and ethnic outreach programs similar to those carried on directly by art or science museums, and state historical societies have often helped promote and assist local historical societies in counties and municipalities.

The organization of all this activity was not always done by a historical society. Sometimes a government department or commission was in control; in other instances, history museums were privately organized without the historical society form. A few examples of high-grade American history museums in this general category would include the National Museum of History and Technology, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington; the Museum of the City of New York; the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission; the Detroit Historical Museum; the North Carolina Division of Archives and History; and the Museum of New Mexico.¹⁴

Historic Houses

Americans developed their own distinctive version of historic preservation while Europeans were restoring their churches and castles or gathering vernacular architecture and folk objects into outdoor museums. The historic house museum, in the opinion of its founders, was a way to teach love of country. The committee seeking to save the Hasbrouck House, Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, New York, argued that no traveler in the area would

hesitate to make a pilgrimage to this beautiful spot, associated as it is with so many delightful reminiscences of our early history. And if he have an American heart in his bosom, he will feel himself to be a better man; his patriotism will kindle with deeper emotion; his aspirations for his country's good will ascend from a more devout mind, for having visited "Head-Quarters of Washington."

The State of New York bought the house for about \$10,000 in 1850, agreed to maintain and operate it, and appointed the Newburgh Village Board of Trustees custodian "to keep it as it was during General Washington's occupancy."¹⁵ This was the first historic house museum opened in the United States, but another one much better known was Mount Vernon, Washington's plantation in Virginia. It is a monument to the first outstanding American historic preservationist, Ann Pamela Cunningham of South Carolina.

Various proposals had been made for Mount Vernon—that it serve as a summer residence for the president, that it be an old soldiers' home, a model farm, or an agricultural college. Private speculators suggested converting the mansion into a resort hotel or using the estate as a factory site. Neither the federal government nor the commonwealth of Virginia would agree to acquire it, but Miss Cunningham determined to "save American honor from a blot in the eyes of the gazing world" and to establish a shrine where "the mothers of the land and their innocent children might make their offering in the cause of greatness, goodness, and prosperity of their country." She had found her life work and soon showed herself a shrewd planner, promoter, and organizer. The commonwealth of Virginia in 1856 chartered the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union. Miss Cunningham, as regent, chose prominent, energetic vice-regents from some thirty states and outlined a varied assortment of imaginative money-making schemes. The Ladies' Association raised \$200,000 to buy the plantation and began preservation work on the mansion on February 22, 1860. Extravagant schemes were suggested, such as taking the house down piece by piece and replacing it with a marble-faced replica, but Miss Cunningham with good common sense declared that the Ladies' Association would "preserve with sacred reverence" Washington's house and grounds "in the state he left them."

Mount Vernon illustrated American reliance on private voluntary organizations. Amateur efforts could count, especially when led by clever, energetic women. The Ladies' Association as an early example of effective organization helped advance the cause of women's rights. Mount Vernon inspired many imitators. General Andrew Jackson's Hermitage near Nashville, Tennessee, George Mason's Gunston Hall and the Lees' Stratford in Virginia, and Valley Forge in Pennsylvania are only a few of them. The fashion was for historic-house projects to refer to themselves as "second only to Mount Vernon."¹⁶

Another great contribution to saving historic houses was made by William Sumner Appleton through the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, which he organized at Boston in 1910.

Appleton had a much broader concept of historic preservation than the women who worked at Mount Vernon and on other early projects. To them, historical and patriotic purposes were dominant, and they regarded historic houses as shrines. They thought it best to develop the houses as museums devoted to great personalities and important historical events. Appleton, on the other hand, played up the architectural or aesthetic worth of historic houses. He wished to save them as useful documents of the past, and he saw clearly that many valuable houses would be lost if only those connected with great leaders and significant historical events were preserved. He also realized that not every historic house was suitable for, or could be supported as, a museum.

Thus Appleton's society tried to save houses by continuing them as residences or by finding some suitable adaptive use (as offices, antique shops, community centers, tearooms, and the like) that would not harm their fabric and would prolong their life. This approach emphasized the mellow and pleasing aura of an old building for modern living. It also had the practical advantage of keeping the house on the tax roll. Sumner Appleton was so enthusiastic, inspiring, and ingenious that, at his death in 1947, his society possessed fifty-one historic structures scattered throughout New England outside of Vermont. Since then, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has continued its leadership in the preservation field.¹⁷

The National Park Service, created in 1916 in the U.S. Department of the Interior, brought the federal government fully into the history museum and historic preservation movement with the Historic Sites Act of 1935. It declared it "a national policy to preserve for historic use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States." This policy was greatly expanded by the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which established the National Register of Historic Places, created the Advisory Council on Historic Places to protect registered landmarks, and authorized the Park Service to administer a matching grants-in-aid program. (These activities were transferred in 1978 to a newly created bureau, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, in the Department of the Interior). The Park Service has also developed trailside museums and visitor centers for its numerous archaeological and historical properties. A central co-ordinating but nongovernmental preservation agency appeared in 1949 in the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which operates a few properties of its own but advises and assists numerous member organizations.

Today there are about two thousand historic house museums in the

United States, and new ones open every year. One reason for this expansion has been the increased interest Americans are taking in their early history. In an era of rapid technological change, threatening atomic annihilation, and deteriorating economic prosperity, thoughtful citizens seek reassurance that the American system of government is well conceived and sturdy enough to survive. Emphasis on a common national background has important psychological values. Then, practical sociological/economic developments—the automobile and increased leisure—are other reasons for historic house museum proliferation. At the same time, leaders of the historic preservation movement agree that its great future growth lies not in the museum field, but in historic districts—areas of residential and adaptive uses in our cities. The first of these districts developed in Charleston and New Orleans in the 1930s, and there are about thirteen hundred of them in existence today. Though the districts usually designate some buildings as museums, the emphasis is on using the architectural past as a pleasant, inspiring background for modern living.¹⁸

American Outdoor Museums

Colonial Williamsburg, the preserved and restored capital of eighteenth-century Virginia, is probably the best-known outdoor museum in the United States. As a history museum, it is an expansion of the historic-house concept to include the major part of a colonial city, some 175 acres and about 30 buildings with carefully furnished interiors open to the visiting public. As a living historic district, it also has about 100 properties occupied by residents of Williamsburg or rented to tourists.

Colonial Williamsburg was founded in 1926, when John D. Rockefeller, Jr., decided to finance the dream of the Reverend W. A. R. Goodwin, rector of Bruton Parish Church, to bring the colonial capital back to life. The town plan was virtually intact, and some eighty-five original buildings still stood. They were provided with authentic outbuildings; gardens based on American and English precedents were developed; and some important buildings were reconstructed when enough evidence was available. Historical, architectural, archaeological, and curatorial researchers worked together to obtain a high degree of authenticity. As the project matured, careful attention was given to its education program or interpretation. Well-trained, costumed guides, working craftsmen, life on the scene (carriages, oxcarts, and livestock), period dining, military drills, music, dancing, plays, fireworks, and

many other activities appealed to the visitor and encouraged his participation, while a varied list of publications and audiovisual productions as well as reproduced furniture and furnishings spread the Williamsburg story outside the restored city. Special attention was given to school groups, with emphasis placed on using the historical environment with the new inquiry method of teaching history. A forum series employed the Williamsburg background for in-depth study of furniture and furnishings, gardens, principles of government, and other areas.

The idea of making use of a preservation project as an outdoor museum has become popular in the United States. Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts preserves a typical New England village; Old Salem in North Carolina restores an early Moravian community; Spring Mill Village in Indiana recreates a Midwest frontier settlement; and Columbia, California, shows a typical mining town. These are only a few examples of this kind of museum.¹⁹

The first large American outdoor museum organized on the Scandinavian model and moving historical structures to a central location was Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Michigan, dedicated by Henry Ford in 1929. Ford thought that historians emphasized politics and wars too much, and he was sometimes contemptuous of book learning, big ideas, and windy generalizations. His anti-intellectual attitude led him to assert: "Most history is more or less bunk." Still, he was interested in his own kind of history, and he said about Greenfield Village:

When we are through, we shall have reproduced American life as lived; and that, I think, is the best way to preserve at least a part of our history and tradition. For by looking at things people used and that show the way they lived, a better and truer impression can be gained than could be had in a month of reading.

In 1922 the Ford tractor factory buildings covering three acres in Dearborn became vacant, and Ford had a repository for his almost compulsive collecting. Sometimes he bought entire antique shops; a noted collection of carriages and automobiles he purchased was transported in fifty freight cars; and one of his engineers in the Ford plant in Manchester, England, shipped him "huge steam engines weighing hundreds of tons and delicate porcelains requiring most careful handling." Ford called his collection "my Smithsonian Institute," and the *New York Times* considered it "the greatest collection of antiques ever acquired by one man."

By 1936 the village contained more than fifty buildings that included a traditional New England green with church, town hall, courthouse, post

office, and general store; the Scotch Settlement schoolhouse Ford attended as a boy; the Plymouth, Michigan, carding mill to which Ford's father took wool; Noah Webster's house; William Holmes McGuffey's Pennsylvania log-cabin birthplace; a 500-ton stone Cotswold Cottage; and the Sir John Bennet jewelry shop from Cheapside, London, with its clock graced by statues of Gog and Magog. This partial listing makes clear the weakness of Ford's conception—its lack of coherence and of a clear central idea. He also distrusted museum professionals and took pleasure in making all decisions himself. The indoor Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village nevertheless remain an important and valuable collection that slowly takes more meaningful form.

Many outdoor museums of this general type have developed since World War II, including Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, Farmers Museum at Cooperstown, New York, Shelburne Museum in Vermont, Upper Canada Village in Morrisburg, Ontario, and Stonefield and Old World Wisconsin in Wisconsin. It should be pointed out, however, that the best of these projects work hard to define a clear concept of purpose and do painstaking historical research to recreate an authentic, historically justifiable community. This scholarly approach makes the outdoor museum much more useful for teaching social history and advances it several steps beyond the idea of moving disparate old buildings into a pleasant parklike setting.²⁰

The historic houses and outdoor museums of the United States constitute a three-dimensional panorama that traces American history from its earliest colonial settlements to its modern industrial civilization. Although the relative youth of the United States must be taken into consideration, the fact remains that this country has more of its three-dimensional history left than any of the older nations. It is possible today to experience buildings and other remainders of every period of our history, though it would take more than one lifetime to visit all these historical places.

Problems of the History Museum

This rapid survey should have made clear the lack of definition that characterizes this type of museum. The basic problem, as Loris S. Russell says, is that

History is a record of events. It is a stream, a sequence, a continuum. The museum, in contrast, is concerned with things. It is basically static. The totem pole is the end product of many hours of work but tells us little of the work itself.

Georges-Henri Rivière and several other European museum scholars have remarked that history museums too often still follow the conventional anecdotal, great-men, great-events approach to history instead of considering economic, social, and cultural factors. Rivière and Jean-Yves Veillard have set up a model history museum in the Musée de Bretagne in Rennes; they have outlined a general historical framework and themes for the history of that region from geological times to the present. They have called in historians, ethnographers, geologists, geographers, economists, and linguists (as many as twenty outside experts) to assist the museum staff and designers. The working groups criticized the themes and agreed on contents of each one; the historical materials at hand were not allowed to determine them. The experts thought that many museums give too much attention to high-style costumes and furniture, simply because they survive. The planners at Rennes also insisted that the history museum must consider the present, must "foster the dynamic assimilation of knowledge in order the better to challenge the values of the contemporary world." Their theories provide some sound guidance, but the resulting displays are still often static and fragmentary. Placing a Roman milestone and an ancient horseshoe together does little to explain transportation in the Gallo-Roman period; the long labels, manuscripts, maps, and art work used to supplement such scanty objects are still better suited to books than to museums.

The conflict between fluid history and static museum objects helps account for the popularity of the outdoor history museum. It appeals to the visitor's sensory perception and thus gives hints of what it was like to live in another age. Some outdoor museums, however, treat so limited an area and time period that they transmit little sense of development, though the visitors glimpse some continuity in comparing the material culture of another age with that which they experience today. Most outdoor museums also are too neat and clean, and do not pay enough attention to the darker side of human existence—to poverty, disease, ignorance, or slavery. Museum objects may be ill-suited to explain these deficiencies of the past, but oral presentations, books, or audiovisual devices can provide supplementary means for interpretation.

How can historical buildings, furnishings, settings, and isolated objects—frozen bits of history, as it were—convey understanding of a dynamic, continuous flow of human experience? This is the basic problem to which history museums should address themselves; their staffs should give the highest priority to finding solutions. The opinion expressed in 1888 by George Brown Goode, pioneer museum scholar at

the Smithsonian, is still pertinent today: "What the limitations of history museums are to be is impossible at present to predict. In museum administration, experience is the only safe guide. . . . In the history museum most of this experimental administration still remains to be performed."²¹

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