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House museums deal with dwindling interest

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Abstract (summary)

"Are there too many historic house museums?" asked James Vaughan, vice president for historic sites stewardship for the Washington- based National Trust for Historic Preservation. The trust administers 25 historic sites nationally, including Cliveden in Germantown. "Philadelphia is certainly the poster child for it. The answer for me, and this is personal, is if they are all doing the same thing, there probably are too many."

Kris S. Kepford, executive director of Cliveden, on Germantown Avenue, sees the concentration of regional historic sites as an incalculable positive.

The plentiful Colonial sites in the area appear relatively stable. Grumblethorpe, on Germantown Avenue, run by the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, has benefited from a close association with the local schools in Germantown, said Matthew Schultz, society executive director. Elderhostel, a tourism program for older visitors sponsored by the society, has also proved an important source of stabilizing income, Schultz said.

Full Text

To see more of The Philadelphia Inquirer, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to http://www.philly.com.

Feb. 11--It was a quirky idea hatched last summer by Ellen Weiser, director of the historic Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion in Germantown.

Why not hold an "interactive" suffragette tea? Reenacters in costume would recreate the drama of the 1848 women's convention in Seneca Falls -- amidst the mansion's Gothic tableau on West Tulpehocken Street.

Alas, Weiser recalled, it was not to be.

"It sounded so funky and nobody wanted to come," she said with a sigh, allowing that the ticket price was a hefty $200. "I canceled it."

Rather than a public relations coup, the tea party became another cloud shadowing the mansion and its future.

Faced with dwindling numbers of visitors, volunteers and board members and decreasing finances, Maxwell Mansion -- the only restored historic Victorian house in the region -- is considering whether it should stay a museum at all.

Maxwell, named for its first owner, a wealthy textile merchant, is home to a fine collection of decorative art and artifacts from the latter half of the 19th century.

Its woes, however, do not make this stone landmark unique in the house museum world. Those who run such sites say they are continually scrambling for ways to attract visitors, volunteers and money -- anything to keep operations going. Collaborations, school programs, events, party rentals, you name it: Historic houses are probably game to try it.

Historic houses are, by definition, survivors.

"We have no plans to close," said Joan Hauger, director of the Welsh Valley Preservation Society, which operates the 18th Century Morgan Log House in Towamencin Township, Montgomery County.

Despite a dearth of funds, loss of staff and reduced hours, Hauger said she was looking forward to a new long-term lease and new programs to attract visitors and serve local schools.

"It would be a big loss to the community if we closed, and hopefully the community feels the same way," she said. "We're optimistic."

That faith isn't unusual for operators of the roughly 300 historic sites, largely house museums, in the region. Most such houses seek in some way to tell the stories of their early occupants and make vivid the history of the region and nation.

In New Jersey, where most of historic sites are owned and operated by the state, museum homes face similar challenges and often compete for grants. And state support is not always a given.

For instance, in 1991 state officials closed the Hancock House museum -- the site of a March 21, 1778, massacre of patriots by English loyalists -- as a cost-saving measure. Residents who lived near the Salem County house formed the "Friends of The Hancock House" in 1995 and persuaded the state to reopen it in 1999.

But local interest in the 1734 house has waned and finding volunteers is more difficult than ever, said Doris Tice, 67, a board member.

"We have a bunch of old codgers trying to keep the place going," Tice said, only half-joking.

A survey taken a few years ago by the Heritage Philadelphia Program of the Pew Charitable Trusts reported that annual visitors numbered more than 1 million to the roughly 100 sites reporting. About a third of those sites were open free of charge.

It's no wonder, perhaps, that virtually all historic sites face problems similar to Maxwell's, leading some to suggest that there may be too much history for the area --

though other officials marvel at the mass.

"Are there too many historic house museums?" asked James Vaughan, vice president for historic sites stewardship for the Washington- based National Trust for Historic Preservation. The trust administers 25 historic sites nationally, including Cliveden in Germantown. "Philadelphia is certainly the poster child for it. The answer for me, and this is personal, is if they are all doing the same thing, there probably are too many."

But Kris S. Kepford, executive director of Cliveden, on Germantown Avenue, sees the concentration of regional historic sites as an incalculable positive.

"There's a real strength in having a lot of houses," she said. "And Philadelphia has an opportunity to make sure these resources don't go away."

In Germantown, for instance, at least half a dozen public sites are devoted to the Colonial- and Revolutionary-era experience.

Just two years ago, Cliveden merged with Upsala House across Germantown Avenue. The volunteer organization devoted to Upsala, which dates from the 1740s, had struggled for many years.

"How can we make ourselves more relevant to the neighborhood?" Kepford said. "How can people tap into us for something more? With Upsala, we'll have a space and a building... that's more visible."

Kepford said that Cliveden was looking at "many of the same problems" as Maxwell.

"Fewer people are coming through the door and there's a sense that a lot of these places aren't relevant," she said. "A lot of what they do is try to attract tourists, and that market has shifted."

Last year, Cliveden saw about 900 tourists drop by, down about 150 from the previous year. But school visitation nearly doubled during the same period, from about 800 in 2002 to 1,400 in 2003, Kepford said. Group visitors also rose. Total visitation, then, is actually up.

Kepford attributes the jump in school visits to History Hunters, a program run with other area sites. The program is funded by the Heritage Philadelphia Program, but funding is ending.

Stenton has seen similar increases in visitation, said director Stephen Hague. In 2000, about 1,500 people visited the mansion, at North 18th Street and Windrim Avenue, he said. Last year, the number of visitors climbed to about 4,000. Increased visits by school groups, subsidized by those soon-to-end grants, account for much of the increase.

The plentiful Colonial sites in the area appear relatively stable. Grumblethorpe, on Germantown Avenue, run by the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, has benefited from a close association with the local schools in Germantown, said Matthew Schultz, society executive director. Elderhostel, a tourism program for older visitors sponsored by the society, has also proved an important source of stabilizing income, Schultz said.

John M. Groff, executive director of Wyck, a Colonial-era house on Germantown Avenue, has also embraced new kinds of programs. In addition to the History Hunter program, Wyck has mounted Story Tours, a melding of drama and storytelling.

"It's definitely a trend -- using actors, using more storytelling, using more personal experience, using food, dining," said Groff.

Prudence Haines, director of Hope Lodge in Fort Washington, Montgomery County, and president of the Tri-State Coalition of Historic Places, said such programs could be critical for survival.

"But they require nimbleness on the part of people running them," she said.

Inquirer staff writer Wendy Ruderman contributed to this article.

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