A Passion to Preserve

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Mark Sammons

Now director of the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Mark Sammons was until recently “chief cook, bottle-washer, and curator” at the Newburyport Maritime Society in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He has worked at Strawbery Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (Strawbery Banke is the city’s original name), and at Old Sturbridge Village and Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts. Sammons lives in Kittery, Maine, with his partner, David, in an 1806 house that, he is happy to say, was rehabilitated by someone else before they bought it.

BY THE AGE OF NINE OR TEN, kids have seen enough birthdays and Christmases go by to begin to develop a sense of the passage of time, a sense of history. When I was that age, my parents moved us from Schenectady, New York, to the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. The two-hundred-year-old church we had attended in Schenectady made little impression on me; I was too young to comprehend it. But I quickly grasped that our house in Massachusetts was one hundred years old, an impressive number to a kid just turning nine. My mother and a friend of hers went around the house knocking on walls, hoping to find a covered-over fireplace as a friend of theirs had found one. I was greatly intrigued.

In about 1965 my mother and I made our first visit to Old Sturbridge Village, an outdoor history museum in central Massachusetts. On that glorious spring day time seemed to stand as still as the motionless columns of smoke above the chimneys. The unpaved roads, the livestock, vehicles, and clothing all created a sense of other-worldliness. An early teen and incipient nerd, I was beguiled by the atmosphere of the place. For years afterward I drew the floor plans of buildings I had seen there and did sketches of furniture out of the souvenir photo booklet I bought.

This fantasy-of-the-past phase gave way to a new reality in the spring of my junior year in high school. A chance conversation at a Sunday school picnic landed me a summer job with the Berkshire County Historical Society, indexing historic buildings over an area of three or four towns. The last week of school I was carrying around a two-foot stack of books on architectural history; to complete the effect I should have had a safety strap on my eyeglasses and a pocket protector. Today those who knew me then assure me that I was not only weird but unbearably boring. In any case I plowed through those books and worked hard.
My mother was fond of quoting Auntie Mame’s remark that “the whole world is a banquet and all the poor bastards are starving to death.” My parents saw to it that we gorged: my siblings and I were saturated in Baroque music at home and at Tanglewood, in post-Impressionist painting at the Clark Art Institute, in contemporary dance at Jacob’s Pillow, and dinner-table conversation that encompassed Tudor politics, theology, the Civil Rights movement, the war in Viet Nam. Like kids everywhere we assumed this home life was normal.

All this and a college summer job at Hancock Shaker Village have shaped my interest in social history and interdisciplinary study. A deep flaw in history museums today is their lack of breadth of background knowledge and range of inquiry. A well-done restoration or exhibit should allow free motion in connecting the local to the regional, national, and international, with cross-references beyond the obvious aesthetic and technological connections, to encompass literature, philosophy, politics, religion, even sex and sexuality. If history isn’t used as context for making decisions today, why bother studying or preserving it?

From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, historic preservation in America has been shaped by gay men. It’s obvious that we’ve been busy in the private sector during the recent decades of urban gentrification, but we’ve also been a major influence in history museums. I’ve been a history-museum professional since 1975. As a starry-eyed teenager I hoped to enter the curatorial field because of my appreciation of beautiful old things and the romance of the past. However, after college I entered the educational and administrative wings of the field and have remained there. This has shaped my perceptions considerably, so that I see objects, buildings, and landscapes as documents from which to understand, interpret, and teach a larger social history.

Through the 1980s, my former partner and I restored three Victorian houses in small mill towns in central Massachusetts and northeastern Connecticut. Doing serial restorations was not our intention. We were biding our time until we could afford a rural house. We purchased affordable houses that were in good historical condition as well as good physical shape. We removed later accretions, mostly post–World War II asbestos siding, aluminum storm windows, partitions, fake hardware-store paneling, and the like, leaving us with a house that was historically intact and in need of scrubbing, surface work, and painting. This meant we could get fine results on a shoestring budget. When we would read about couples who spent fifteen years restoring a house, we recognized the advantages of being well informed in our choice of property. (This was usually expressed in uncharitable remarks like, “Why didn’t those morons do their research before they bought!”) As we
polychromed the exteriors of these houses in appropriate colors, our neighbors often took note and began trying the approach on their houses. Two of our houses were in Southbridge, Massachusetts, a town fighting a declining economy, so I can’t say our work inspired the blossoming of a restoration district. But our third house was in Putnam, Connecticut, also in economic decline, and our restoration work there did cause the neighborhood to perk up.

All my professional jobs have involved conducting preservation, interpreting scholarly restorations, and promoting the value of the built environment as context for understanding how we came to be what we are today. I’ve also been researching and writing social history. At Sturbridge I worked on the history of education, religion, politics, law, banking, and rural commerce. I worked on a lot of subjects at Strawbery Banke as well, but I’m most pleased to have collaborated with a community member to compile a three-hundred-page resource book on local black history from 1645 to 1970. In working on this project I made a point of calling attention to parallels between the experiences of black Americans and those of other minorities, including Jewish and gay Americans.

Gay people preserving straight history is akin to me, a suburban white boy, doing a black history project. But while gay people are simply expected to preserve straight history—after all, we’ve done it so well for so long—we are usually dismissed if we suggest that gay history be included. Even with properties that originated with gay men. Consider Beauport, Henry Davis Sleeper’s house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, now owned and operated by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. There’s no doubt that Sleeper was a major decorating queen: he single-handedly defined the look of interiors decorated with American antiques. Yet on my recent tour of Beauport it was never mentioned that Henry Sleeper, who’s been dead for decades, was gay. Why would the truth be considered invasive or irrelevant?

Before it was state law in New Hampshire, I asked the board of Strawbery Banke to add sexual orientation to the Equal Opportunity Employer paragraph of its handbook. When they asked if I was making the request because of problems with other staff, I said, no, I was doing it to protect the institution from future bigotry. I asked them to contemplate the losses if everything done here by gay men were to disappear at the snap of a finger. Comprehending the scale of those contributions, they made the change.

Is preserving civil rights a form of historic preservation? Looking at the Constitution, I’d say yes. Looking at the grim realities of the past centuries, I’d say it’s an innovation! When the Portsmouth city council held a public hearing on a proposed gay civil rights amendment, I presented myself in my best WASP ethnic costume (navy blazer, gray flannel trousers, boring
necktie) and asked what I as a local historian might bring to the consider-ation of the issue. I cited the role of bigotry in the city’s history, as attempts were made to limit or intimidate minorities. Three-quarters of the council was of Irish descent, so I illustrated my remarks using the Irish experience and noting the extraordinary contributions the Irish have made to the local culture. I suggested that we learn from the past and establish equal civil rights, liberty, and justice for all. I even caused some inadvertent hilarity by “coming out” as part Irish, a fact long suppressed in my own family’s lore.