



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
FACULTY OF INFORMATION

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Dear DEMHIST Board:

I would like to express my gratitude for having been selected for the Jeanne Watson Bursary this year. The 2019 Kyoto General Conference was a valuable opportunity to reconnect with colleagues I have come to know through my involvement with DEMHIST as well as meet new professional who also love house museums.

My contribution to the discourse this year started off with my paper, *Finding a way into Fogland: the construction of historical narratives at Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House*. This presentation first identified the theoretical underpinning of how historical narratives evolve and then explored examples of how narratives have been constructed at selected house museums in the United States. There was a point of reckoning in the 1970s and 1980s when scholars, such as Hayden White, Stephen Bann, Roland Barthes, and Michele Foucault, started debating how history is reconstructed through narratives ultimately questioning whether the author was indeed the master of meaning. Regardless of when a text was written, it will be continually reinterpreted for a contemporary audience. The depiction of traditions within house museums function in the same way.

I then profiled Mount Vernon (Mount Vernon, Virginia), George Washington's plantation house, as the first house museum in the United States. The early interpretation at Mount Vernon shows how house museum narratives were used to formalize national myths around American founding fathers. My next example, the House of the Seven Gables (Salem, Massachusetts), illustrates what can happen when a constructed narrative is wholeheartedly adopted. Before opening the house as a museum in 1910 a major reconstruction occurred to the structure of the building so that the interiors mirrored the fictional story *House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It should be noted that Hawthorne never owned or lived at the house, he did however visit the house when it was owned by his cousin. The biggest alteration made was the creation of a secret staircase that was concealed around the central chimney! The current narrative told at the site includes how and why the house was altered to appeal to visitors.

Finally, changes to the interpretation at Beauport, the Sleeper-McCann House (Gloucester, Massachusetts) resulted in the inclusion of previously invisible social groups (i.e. early 20thc gay culture, working class). Their voices now animate the material traces they left behind with colourful

stories told by tour guides. Although history is manufactured, by plotting the evolution of stories and traditions we learn about both the past and the present.

One of the other panels at the conference that I have reflected on was the “Large Impact by Joining Forces” joint session between DEMHIST, ICOM-Netherlands, EXARC, and ICOM-Japan. I was struck by how different countries have navigated, with varying levels of intentionality, formally colonial relationships. The discussion about different approaches to post-colonial museum legacies was engaging. There is still much terrain to navigate while considering how colonial collections should be managed within house museums.

Additionally, I was really benefitted from the opportunity to experience and understand how a non-Western country conceptualizes and operates house museums. The site visits within Kyoto enabled me to understand more about how the country conceptualizes their museums, historic structures, and landscapes. Japanese hospitality has left a very favourable memory with me.

Again, I would like to thank the selection committee for awarding me the Jeanne Watson Bursary this year. Jeanne’s memory certainly lives on through this bursary, as I had several conversations about her and her unyielding dedication to DEMHIST throughout the conference.

Sincerely,

Hillary Walker