

More than “Chester County’s Attic”: A Case Study on the Chester County Historical Society
Analyzing the Complex Relationship Between Local History and Community

by

Chloe Nedved

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Approved by:

Andrea Burns, PhD., Thesis Director

Kristen Baldwin Deathridge, PhD., Second Reader

Michael Behrent, PhD., Department Director

I. Introduction

“You've got to decide who you are... We cannot be Chester County's attic.”¹ Stephen Hoyt, the president of the Chester County Historical Society's board of directors in 1989, issued this statement in defense of the Society's decision to change their mission going forward, and he was not alone. The statement reflects the concerns of many historical societies across the United States at the end of the 20th century. The birth of local historical societies began around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, as small groups of wealthy elites banded together to preserve and celebrate the history of their local communities.² The Chester County Historical Society was one of these societies, as local community members met at the end of the 19th century to create an institution that would protect and preserve its community's history. People trusted historical societies with one mission: to safeguard the family treasures that formerly collected dust in their attics and basements. However, as the United States became a more diverse nation throughout the 20th century, people found they could not relate to the histories told through historical societies, and as a result, visitorship and interest declined. Towards the end of the 20th century, many historical societies in America struggled to maintain their collections and buildings due to a lack of visitor funds and donations.

Some historical societies sought to change how their community viewed their institution in the hopes of gaining more visitors. The Chester County Historical Society (CCHS) in West Chester, Pennsylvania, made the bold decision to sell off some of their historic house properties with the goal of using the funds to renovate their building and expand their public programming. The community saw these sales as an act of betrayal against the very history the Society had

¹Shelly Phillips, “Historical Society To Sell 4 Houses,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 23, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/historical-society-sell-4-houses/docview/1834315703/se-2>.

²Debbie Ann Doyle, “The Future of Local Historical Societies,” *Perspectives on History*, December 1, 2012, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/december-2012/the-future-of-local-historical-societies>.

sworn to protect. Legal battles resulted in the success of the sales, but it left the community feeling distrustful towards the Society and hurt by its actions. CCHS had to work to regain the trust of its community after such a controversial event. Since the incident, the Chester County Historical Society (now called the Chester County History Center) has grown and further developed its educational programming, becoming one of the premier historical societies in the state of Pennsylvania and the country.³ However, some members of the community still remember this event from its past as a black mark on the institution's record.

Historians view historical societies as an important place to preserve and interpret history for the public, making them key players in the historical profession.⁴ However, many historians and historical societies debate over the concept of shared authority and the role it plays in the interpretation of history. Shared authority means providing communities with the opportunity to work with historians and historical societies as they interpret the history of the area, allowing them to represent their voices and opinions in the history. The current "best practice" in the field of public history calls for public historians to establish a policy of shared authority with the members of their communities. But how much authority should the community have? What happens when the community desires to present a history that lacks certain viewpoints or voices? Public historians in many local history institutions across the country debate the answers to these questions as they struggle to determine the level of community involvement in their institutions' missions.

In some cases of the interpretation of local or community history, the members of the community might want to downplay or even hide difficult history that they feel might harm the

³In June 2020, the Chester County Historical Society decided to rebrand and changed its name to the Chester County History Center. Since I plan on discussing the events in the years 1989-1991, I will mostly use the abbreviation CCHS to refer to the organization. However, if I use the abbreviation CCHC when talking about the society of the present day, it is the same organization.

⁴Doyle, "The Future of Local Historical Societies."

reputation of their community. Local historians of today do have a responsibility to serve their communities, but they also have a responsibility to provide, to the best of their ability, an objective interpretation of historical events. This thesis will briefly analyze the downside to shared authority in the interpretation of local history, but it will mainly focus on the issue of broken trust between local historical institutions and their communities. When communities lose their trust in historical institutions, it sets off a ripple effect with tangible consequences, such as the loss of donors and the reclaiming of artifacts from the institution's collection. Although the incident involving CCHS and the community of Chester County dealt less with historical interpretation and more with the overall mission of the institution, it still reveals that local history institutions have an obligation to promote open communication and listen to the ideas and concerns of their community in order to establish trust and preserve their community's history. In return for the institution establishing this shared authority, the community should then trust that the history institution will effectively determine the best approach for preserving and interpreting the community's history through their mission.

To develop a better understanding of the complicated role of historical societies in the local communities they serve, I plan to treat the incident at CCHS as a case study. I will provide background on the history of CCHS as well as background on Humphry Marshall and the history of his house. I will also explain how CCHS came to the decision to sell its properties and focus its efforts on educational programming. I will explain the conflict that ensued with the community and explore the effects the sale ultimately had on the community and the Society. I will conclude the case study by offering possible solutions for historic house museums and other local history institutions that can help them reevaluate their mission and better connect with their

communities. I will also analyze how the concept of shared authority contributes to historical societies building trust and strengthening relationships with their communities.

II. Historiography

In order to understand the struggle of local history institutions to fulfill the history-based desires of their community while staying true to their mission, one must understand the recent developments in the field of local history and historic house museums. Historic house museums and other small public history institutions have struggled to keep up, both financially and culturally. In her book, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*, Donna Ann Harris, the principal of a consulting firm that works in the field of historic preservation and heritage tourism, assesses the current state of house museums and offers new solutions for their preservation and how they can remain in their communities. Harris begins by asserting that many local community members will rescue a historic house and transform it into a museum due to emotional attachment and a lack of trust in private ownership, even if they lack the funds and skills necessary to run it as a museum.⁵ She then focuses on a number of obvious problems facing house museums, like a lack of funding, but she also points out that the age and experience of the board members at these institutions can cause difficulties when it comes to preserving house museums.⁶ The solutions Harris offers range from finding creative ways to maintain the house museum to selling the property with protective easements. The idea of selling off a historic property appears quite radical, but Harris believes

⁵Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums : Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*, American Association for State and Local History Book Series, (AltaMira Press, 2007), 4.

⁶Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 13-14.

that the world of historic house museums is evolving, and sometimes the best option for a historic house is as a private home that its owners can restore, preserve, and love.⁷

Franklin Vagnone and Deborah Ryan's *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums: "A Ground-Breaking Manifesto,"* proposes additional, more radical changes to the old way of managing historic house museums. Vagnone brings his expertise as the president and CEO of Old Salem Museums and Gardens as well as a board member of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums, and Ryan shares her knowledge as a professor of architecture and urban design at University of North Carolina Charlotte. Both Vagnone and Ryan share their lack of emotional and/or personal connection they have often experienced at historic house museums and identify one of the key problems of historic house museums as being "increasingly viewed by their communities as irrelevant and unresponsive to the demographic and technological changes around them."⁸ They suggest some out-of-the-box solutions that challenge the traditional practices of public history, with the main purpose of making house museums more relevant and relatable to their communities once again. The authors emphasize that historic houses need to pay more attention to their local communities, in addition to tourists, by giving them more representation in the history of their community. Vagnone and Ryan place community engagement as a higher priority than historic preservation, stressing a balance between good preservation and strong neighborhood engagement. They provide examples of how artists used condemned historic houses as canvases for public artwork projects to give the properties a sense of pride for the community.⁹

⁷Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 11.

⁸Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums: "A Ground-Breaking Manifesto,"* (California: Left Coast Press Inc., 2016), 39.

⁹Vagnone and Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 157-158.

Other historians have also explored the complicated relationship between public history and the public it is meant to serve. Public historians Katharine Corbett and Howard Miller address the issues public historians face when making decisions on how to interpret history in their article, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry.” Corbett and Miller argue that the field of public history is “always situational and frequently messy,” and that the concepts of shared inquiry and other public history practices “emerge out of experimental give-and-take.”¹⁰ They acknowledge the difficulties that come with allowing audiences to have a voice in the interpretation of history, citing instances like the *Enola Gay* exhibit controversy at the Smithsonian. However, since public history involves more interaction with the general public than the field of academic history, Corbett and Miller believe that public historians have a stronger obligation to “meet their audiences where they are” than the typical academic historian.¹¹

James Gardner, the former associate director of curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History, explores a similar debate in history in his article, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public.” Although Gardner focuses on the gap between academic historians and the public on the issue of contested history, he does address the fact that some academic historians tend to view the general public as having an emotional and nostalgic understanding of history, arguing that this conflicts with the past that public historians actually seek to represent.¹² Gardner, like Corbett and Miller, believes that all historians should work to foster a sense of shared authority and shared voice with their audiences, as they feel a sense of

¹⁰Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. (Dick) Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” *The Public Historian* 28 no. 1 (2006): 19, <https://doi-org.proxy006.nclive.org/10.1525/tph.2006.28.1.15>.

¹¹Corbett and Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” 20.

¹²James B. Gardner, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (2004): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2004.26.4.11>.

ownership in history.¹³ It is his understanding that this does not compromise the field of public history, but rather strengthens it.

In the past decade, more public historians have come forward to address the issue of public involvement in history and the evolving role of local historical institutions. In 2012, Debbie Ann Doyle published her brief article entitled “The Future of Local Historical Societies” to examine the past role of historical societies and to understand how that role has changed and grown as the field of public history evolves. Doyle explains how the wealthy elite in communities originally founded historical societies to preserve their own history and ancestry, but now these societies struggle to attract funding and visitors due to an increasingly diverse society’s lack of interest in these histories.¹⁴ Historical societies are adapting to the current changes of society in order to maintain relevancy and keep their doors open. Most importantly, they are trying to provide a space for the public to feel more involved in its history, a topic Lynn Dierking also discusses in her article, “Being of Value: Intentionally Fostering and Documenting Public Value.” Dierking, an Oregon-based researcher studying Free-Choice Learning in museums and other community settings, seeks to define the concept of “public value,” and how museums and other public history institutions can promote public value in their spaces. She believes that these organizations need to establish meaningful connections and work to understand the true needs of their own communities in order to create a sense of public value.¹⁵ Both Doyle and Dierking understand that public history institutions need to work with their surrounding community to remain relevant and better serve their communities. This idea of

¹³Gardner, “Contested Terrain,” 14.

¹⁴Doyle, “The Future of Local Historical Societies.”

¹⁵Lynn D. Dierking, “Being of Value: Intentionally Fostering and Documenting Public Value,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 35, no. 1 (2010): 10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25701637>.

public value in public history supports Gardner, Corbett, and Miller's concept of shared authority as public historians seek to reach their communities in new and evolving ways.

The issue of ethics is another aspect of public history that remains relevant in the field as well as to the topic of this thesis. Large public history organizations, such as the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), have published and updated their own code of ethics for institutions to offer guidelines for this often confusing subject. AAM's code of ethics speaks to the concept of loyalty, asserting that no matter what conflicts arise, museums must not compromise loyalty to their missions or to the public they serve.¹⁶ Other public historians have commented on and contributed to the ongoing discussion of ethics, some even specifically in the field of local history. Theodore Karamanski's "Ethics and Local History," focuses on the intimate relationship local public historians must have with the history of their community and how each decision often has an immediate and deeply felt impact on the community.¹⁷ When discussing the complex relationship between public history institutions and the communities they serve, it is worth mentioning the current scholarship on ethics as well as the influence of ethics on local historical societies.

Local public history scholarship identifies many of the conflicts and dilemmas that public historians and their institutions face when it comes to interpreting and preserving their community's history. While some of these scholars do offer solutions for these issues, the ongoing conversation remains complex in nature and is constantly evolving. My thesis will expand upon these ideas and demonstrate how they can be applied to real-world situations,

¹⁶"AAM Code of Ethics for Museums," *American Alliance of Museums*, last accessed September 12, 2023, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/>.

¹⁷Theodore J. Karamanski, "Ethics and Local History," in *Encyclopedia of Local History*, 2017, 3rd edition, https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1457979&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_211.

specifically in the case of the Chester County History Center. Although CCHC itself is not a house museum and the event in question occurred over three decades ago, it can still benefit from the suggestions this scholarship offers because of its status as a small, local history institution. As a case study, the story of what happened at CCHC can also serve as a lesson for other local history institutions that find themselves in similar struggles between their duty to history and their community.

III. Background

The Chester County Historical Society

In 1893, forty individuals met at the West Chester Public Library with the mission of protecting and preserving the history of Chester County. This humble meeting marked the birth of the Chester County Historical Society.¹⁸ In these early days, the Society focused on the collection of historical items, the dedication of historical markers in the community, and the search for a permanent location.¹⁹ As the decades passed, the historical society's members and collections grew, and in 1942 they moved their headquarters into a historical building in downtown West Chester known as Horticultural Hall.

As their museum collections continued to grow, they emphasized collecting “regional furniture, textiles and decorative arts objects, as well as material representing all aspects of life in southeastern Pennsylvania.”²⁰ Throughout the mid-20th century, CCHS continued to renovate Horticultural Hall to expand the exhibition space and accommodate their growing collections. In the early 1980s, CCHS partnered with the Chester County government to take care of the over

¹⁸Phillips, “Historical Society To Sell 4 Houses.”

¹⁹“About Us,” Chester County History Center, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://mycchc.org/about-us/>.

²⁰“About Us,” Chester County History Center.

300 years of history housed in the public documents of the Chester County Archives.²¹ As a result of this partnership, CCHS prided itself on having one of the most extensive and impressive collections and archives in the state of Pennsylvania. This project, as well as their collections and exhibition space, also made CCHS one of the premier historical societies in the state of Pennsylvania. In addition to artifacts housed in its collection at Horticulture Hall, CCHS also owned a number of historic house properties at this time, including the home of well-known botanist Humphry Marshall.

Humphry Marshall and the House

In the 18th century, a modest Quaker living in the rural area of Chester County made a name for himself as the “father of American dendrology.” Humphry Marshall (1722-1801), a stone mason, farmer, and amateur astronomer, had a passion for the wilderness of Chester County from a young age, and as an adult, he began to pursue this passion through the study of local plant life.²² He traveled around the eastern coast of North America in search of trees and shrubs, and he would collect seeds to sell both locally and internationally. His research and writings attracted the attention of well known scientists in North America as well as Europe, including Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. Marshall had regular correspondence with Franklin regarding his research, some of which resides in the collections library at CCHS. His greatest accomplishment as a botanist was the publication of his book, *Arbustum Americanum: The American Grove, or An Alphabetical Catalogue of Forest Trees and Shrubs*, in 1785. The book was the first of its kind on North American trees and shrubs and doubled as a catalogue for Marshall’s botanical business.²³ Marshall sold more copies to people in European countries than

²¹“About Us,” Chester County History Center.

²²J.F. Pirro, “Chester County Honors Humphry Marshall, Marshallton’s Founder,” *Main Line Today*, February 1, 2022, <https://mainlinetoday.com/life-style/humphry-marshall-marshallton/>.

²³Pirro, “Chester County Honors Humphry Marshall.”

in the United States, but he was still well-known as a botanist domestically, especially in southeastern Pennsylvania. Marshall's success and fame as a botanist extended past his death. The town where he lived was renamed "Marshallton" in his honor sometime after his death in 1801.

In 1773 and 1774, Marshall used his skills as a stone mason to build a house for himself. He also "established the nation's second proper botanical garden" on the grounds, with his older cousin and well-known botanist John Bartram's garden as the first.²⁴ The home boasts many features that Marshall designed to aid him in his studies of botany and astronomy. After Marshall's death in 1801, his nephew, Moses Marshall, made an effort to continue the upkeep on the gardens and the house, as Marshall had no children of his own. Due to Moses's other responsibilities as a doctor, the gardens fell into disrepair and remained that way after his death in 1813.²⁵ The Marshall house changed hands over the course of the 19th century until Campbell Weir, a man from Wilmington, Delaware and a relative of the Marshall family, purchased the house and property in 1946 and lived there until his passing in 1982.²⁶

The Marshall House and CCHS

In 1958, Weir reached out to the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) in the hopes of the organization taking interest in the Marshall house as a historic property worthy of national recognition. In response, the organization sent out a team to survey the property and determine its eligibility. Over time, Weir continued to work with the NTHP, and in 1971, the National Trust listed the house on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1987, it received its designation as a National Historic Landmark.²⁷ While the National Register lists notable

²⁴Pirro, "Chester County Honors Humphry Marshall."

²⁵Pirro, "Chester County Honors Humphry Marshall."

²⁶"Campbell Weir Collection," Chester County History Center, <https://mycchc.org/campbell-weir-collection/>.

²⁷Pirro, "Chester County Honors Humphry Marshall."

historic buildings and sites across the United States, a National Historic Landmark is a site that significantly contributed to the history of the United States and deserves exceptional recognition. In the early 1960s, Weir also began correspondence with CCHS over his desire to give the Marshall house and property to CCHS in his will. In the 1960s and 1970s, Weir exchanged letters with the executive director of CCHS expressing his proposed plans for the transformation of the Marshall house into a historic house museum. The executive director as well as the board at CCHS approved of his suggestions and worked with Weir to come up with possible expenses and programming ideas for this new house museum. Among letters that contained projected expense reports for the future museum, Weir expressed his dislike of “sterile, period houses,” and Kurt Brandenburg, the CCHS executive director in 1978, responded in agreement, saying that CCHS also wanted the Marshall house to “be interpreted to the public realistically and honestly as the home of one of Chester County’s most noteworthy citizens...”²⁸

In 1976, as CCHS struggled to contain their ever-growing collection and exhibition space, the executive director, Conrad Wilson, wrote to the president of CCHS, John H. Ware III, about the possibility of moving the museum facilities of CCHS to the Marshall property. Wilson explains how he consulted Weir on the matter, and that Weir “was enthusiastically in favor of the idea of a museum on his property,” which had enough space for parking for the many visitors and school groups that would come to the Historical Society.²⁹ It seemed as though the Marshall house would become a place for the Historical Society’s exhibition on Chester County, as well as interpret Humphry Marshall’s life and work as a botanist. However, after Weir passed away in 1982, CCHS never moved their museum operations to the Marshall house, possibly because they

²⁸Kurt E. Brandenburg, Letter to Campbell Weir, July 27, 1978, Chester County History Center Library.

²⁹Conrad Wilson, Letter to John H. Ware III, July 28, 1976.

had found a different property to use as the location for their museum and educational programming.

In 1982, CCHS decided to open up the Marshall home to visitors as part of Chester County Day. This annual local celebration held on the first Saturday of October benefits the Chester County Hospital in West Chester and offers visitors the chance to tour many of the public and private historic buildings in West Chester and the surrounding towns.³⁰ The Society also included the house on a walking tour of Marshallton that year. Those who purchased tickets for Chester County Day or the walking tour could visit the Marshall house and view the antique furniture that Weir had collected over his years of living in the house. Although the furniture did not belong to Humphry Marshall, it dated from the late 1700s and early 1800s, and all were originals.³¹ In this same year, the Society worked with the Southeast National Bank to evaluate the property and determine the best plan moving forward for its maintenance and use.³²

IV. The Conflict and Its Effects

The Decision to Sell and the Community's Response

As the Chester County Historical Society continued to expand in the 1980s, the board members realized they wanted to change the mission and purpose of the Historical Society. Instead of focusing all their efforts on collecting items and buildings of historical significance to Chester County, they decided to place a heavier emphasis on education and programming for the community, expanding the role of their museum and exhibition space. There were only a few other historical societies at the time that began to focus more on programming and less on collections, making CCHS ahead of the curve in the field of local history. The board had already

³⁰Claire Lilley, "Title Unknown," *Daily Local News*, September 16, 1982.

³¹Lilley, "Title Unknown."

³²Lilley, "Title Unknown."

purchased the old YMCA building, next door to Horticultural Hall, and they had plans to renovate the space to house more of their collections, create a research library, and develop an exhibition on Chester County's history.³³ The board also realized the Society did not have the budget to manage its historic house properties and take on this extensive renovation. In April of 1989, CCHS made the decision to list four of its historic house properties for sale, including the home of Humphry Marshall, and use the funds from the sale to finance this renovation.

Immediately after the Society announced its decision to sell the properties, the community protested the sales, especially the sale of the Marshall house. Members of the community felt angered and hurt by the proposed sale of the house. News of the Marshall house sale attracted broader public attention as well. In an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jonathan Wood, a supervisor in West Bradford township where the Marshall house is located, exclaimed "it is very insensitive of the historical society to sell a piece of our township's history," and that "the property was given to the society as a bequest for all of us to enjoy, not to sell."³⁴ With Katherine Campbell, a descendant of Campbell Weir, as the leader, a group of citizens within the community formed the Landmark Coalition in an effort to stop the sale. In late May, citizens banded together and organized a protest march outside of CCHS headquarters in downtown West Chester.³⁵ The coalition took CCHS to court, arguing that the sale of the Marshall house broke the agreement Weir had outlined in his will when he gave the Marshall house to CCHS. Through an injunction that Chester County Court Judge Thomas Gavin issued in early June 1989, the Coalition succeeded in temporarily preventing CCHS from selling the property.

³³"About Us," Chester County History Center.

³⁴Denise Breslin Kachin, "Historical Society Blasted," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr 30, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/historical-society-blasted/docview/1834318046/se-2>.

³⁵Tom Linafelt, "The Selling Of A Piece Of History," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 21, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/selling-piece-history/docview/1834357001/se-2>.

Legal Disputes and the Issue of Preservation

The members of the Landmark Coalition believed that CCHS's decision to sell the Marshall house and property defied the legal agreement Weir had established in his letters to CCHS directors. However, the stipulations for the preservation of the house never made it into Weir's actual will because, according to Chester County Court Judge Lawrence Wood, "they would have jeopardized the tax deductibility of the gift" due to certain tax laws during this time.³⁶ The lawyer representing CCHS argued that because these letters "were not probated with the will, they had no legal standing," therefore giving CCHS the right to sell the Marshall house.³⁷ Around the same time as the Landmark Coalition took CCHS to court, a judge settled a different case that began in 1987 involving CCHS's sale of the 1704 Brinton house. The judge stopped CCHS from selling or altering this property because the Brinton Family Association had given the title to CCHS, but the association still controlled all decisions related to the property.³⁸ The outcome of the Brinton case gave the Landmark Coalition hope that the judge would rule in their favor. Even though Weir did not legally protect the Marshall house from being sold, community members believed that the judge would understand that the written letters between CCHS directors and Weir acted as an agreement in this case.

The community also raised concerns that the Marshall house sale would ruin the preservation of the house, and that CCHS had misused the funds Weir provided in his will for the house. J. Boylston Campbell, a descendant of both Marshall and Weir, believed that CCHS "did

³⁶Tom Linafelt, "Judge Turns Witness In Historic-House Case," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jun 22, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/judge-turns-witness-historic-house-case/docview/1834335847/se-2>.

³⁷Linafelt, "Judge Turns Witness In Historic-House Case."

³⁸Tom Linafelt and Michele M. Fizzano, "Judge Stops Historical House's Sale," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 11, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/judge-stops-historical-houses-sale/docview/1834333402/se-2>.

not use [Weir's funds] for what the ethical intent was, and that was to preserve the house."³⁹

However, Roland Woodward, the executive director of CCHS at the time, clarified that CCHS did use the funds for upkeep and maintenance on the property. Since CCHS acquired the house in 1982, it "spent about \$50,000 on the house and surrounding property," and Woodward claims that CCHS "paid special attention to the site, especially the garden area in front of the house,"⁴⁰ The Society made every effort to use the funds donated in Weir's will for the maintenance of the property from 1982 until their decision to sell in 1989. In fact, cost was one of the factors that CCHS board members considered as they made the decision to sell the property. Even with the generous endowment Weir provided, Woodward and the board members determined that the cost to hire full time staff for a historic house museum and continue maintenance on the property would be too great for the Historical Society to take on.

Woodward also argued that CCHS always planned to ensure the preservation of the house. Before the sale, CCHS worked to draft easements that would protect the historic properties from development or significant alterations. He stated that "preservation has never been an issue...The house will be preserved, there is no question about that. For us the issue was whether or not to operate the property as a house museum."⁴¹ In the eyes of the community, the sale of the Marshall house to a private owner meant a failure to preserve the property, but CCHS simply did not want to operate the property as a historic house museum. Woodward also pointed out how many historical sites and resources in the United States have private owners and that public ownership is not a requirement for preservation.⁴² The community had cherished the idea of the Marshall house becoming a historic house museum, especially since Weir had expressed

³⁹Tom Linafelt, "Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 11, 1989, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/plan-sell-historic-home-raises-ire/docview/1834350868/se-2>.

⁴⁰Linafelt, "Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire."

⁴¹Linafelt, "Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire."

⁴²Linafelt, "Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire."

this desire in his correspondence with CCHS. However, with the threat of the sale, the chief concern became preserving the house, as members of the Landmark Coalition believed that the sale to a private owner would result in the degradation of the historic property.

Historians at other local history institutions also defended CCHS's decision to sell the Marshall house, arguing that the sale was in fact the proper process of deaccessioning. In the field of public history, deaccessioning refers to the process of permanently removing an object from a museum or history institution's collection with the purpose of improving or preserving the collection.⁴³ Ann Barton Brown, the director of the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia, believes that "Every history museum has to do [deaccessioning]," or institutions become overwhelmed with donations, "...storage becomes too tight, and [institutions] have a tendency to stack things on other things, and they break or get hurt."⁴⁴ Although deaccessioning is a common practice for history institutions throughout the country, many of the community members still felt betrayed by the sale, especially because they believed that CCHS used the funds that Weir left in his will for its own financial gain instead of for the preservation of the Marshall house. They also believed that using the funds from the sale of the house for renovation of the YMCA building would be unethical.

The Purpose and Mission of Historical Societies

The community also felt that CCHS had betrayed its role and purpose as a historical society with the sale of the Marshall house. J. Boylston Campbell argued that Weir gave the property to CCHS in the first place because he "[believed] it to be the most trustworthy repository of such an historically valuable property."⁴⁵ Eleanor Morris, the president of the

⁴³"AASLH Statement of Standards and Ethics," *American Association for State and Local History*, revised 2018, <http://download.aaslh.org/AASLH+Statement+of+Standards+and+Ethics+-+Revised+2018.pdf>.

⁴⁴Phillips, "Historical Society To Sell 4 Houses."

⁴⁵Linafelt, "Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire."

French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust, also stated that “[historic] properties are given with the intent that they will be kept intact.”⁴⁶ The community members of Chester County trusted CCHS with the preservation and protection of their items and properties of historical value for decades, and it hurt them to see CCHS sell some of these cherished properties for, in their eyes, money. In the words of Edward Brinton, a member of the Brinton Family Association board of directors, ““People don't donate their homes to a society so that it will sell the house for cash and use the money for whatever they please.””⁴⁷

In response to the backlash from the community over the Marshall house sale, Hoyt and Woodward explained the changing mission and goals of CCHS. From the beginning, the decision to sell the historic properties came out of a desire to increase the focus on educational programming at the Society. According to Hoyt, “every asset [CCHS has] must play a role in some program and must have programmatic use,” and the board of directors determined the Marshall house did not serve a purpose in their programming.⁴⁸ Hoyt also argued that CCHS did not want to be ““an owner and manager of real estate,”” and he perceived the ownership of historic house properties as more of a business venture than serving a purpose for the Historical Society.⁴⁹ In 1997, CCHS faced another issue with the sale of the “Singing Woods” estate, another historic property in its collections. In an article discussing the proposed sale of this property to a private owner, Woodward continued to defend the decision to sell the Marshall house and three other properties back in 1989, explaining how maintenance and the Society’s service to the public were key factors in the decision to sell. He stated that CCHS ““could not run

⁴⁶Linafelt, “The Selling Of A Piece Of History.”

⁴⁷Linafelt and Fizzano, “Judge Stops Historical House's Sale.”

⁴⁸Phillips, “Historical Society To Sell 4 Houses.”

⁴⁹Phillips, “Historical Society To Sell 4 Houses.”

a far-flung empire of historic sites, understaffed, poorly maintained, and serving no long-term public purpose.”⁵⁰

The Effects of the Sale

At the suggestion of the judge, CCHS and the Landmark Coalition attempted to settle the dispute out of court. The West Bradford Township stepped in and offered to buy the house and preserve the surrounding 50 acres as a public park in the early stages of the sale, before Judge Gavin issued the injunction. During negotiations, the plan shifted and the land split up. The township agreed to buy 35 of the original 50 acres and use it as public land. The Historical Society would then sell the remaining 15 acres that included the house to a private buyer, as the township did not have the funds to take care of the entire 50 acres.⁵¹ CCHS signed an agreement with the township, and in 1990, it looked like the dispute over the land had come to an end. However, in the same year, the township lowered the price it had agreed to pay for the land, and CCHS rejected this new offer, thus canceling the agreement.⁵² With the Brandywine Conservancy enforcing the restrictive easements placed on the land to protect its historic value, CCHS struggled to find a new buyer for both sections of the property. In the end, CCHS sold the 15-acre section with the house to a private buyer and the 35-acre section to another buyer.

The sale of the Marshall property left the community feeling hurt and betrayed. Jack Hines, a board member at CCHS during the time of the sale, remembers that people felt “outraged,” blaming CCHS for the poor maintenance of the property and accusing staff members of taking advantage of the property and the artifacts inside the house.⁵³ During the dispute,

⁵⁰Rachel Smolkin, “Judge Attaches Strings To Sale Of Historical Society Property,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug 10, 1997, <https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/judge-attaches-strings-sale-historical-society/docview/1842065684/se-2>.

⁵¹Tom Linafelt, “Marshall House Accord is Reached,” *Daily Local News*, June 6, 1989.

⁵²Richard A. Oppel Jr., “Court Allows Division of Historic Land,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 30, 1991.

⁵³Correspondence with Jack Hines, September 26, 2023.

members of the Weir family began to question whether they could trust the Society with other family artifacts, particularly the Congressional Medal of Honor that Campbell Weir's grandfather, Captain Henry C. Weir, received in 1899 for his service in the Union army during the Civil War. Weir had donated the medal, a letter of commendation from Abraham Lincoln, some regimental flags, and more of his grandfather's belongings to CCHS, together with the Marshall house property after his death in 1982.⁵⁴ The family questioned where CCHS was keeping the medal and other items, or if they had sold them like the Marshall property and the contents of the house. CCHS reassured the family that the medal was on display in an exhibition, and they had recently framed the regiment flags.⁵⁵ Despite the reassurance from CCHS, the trust the Weir family had once placed in CCHS to guard their family artifacts was broken.

In the 1990s, CCHS moved forward with their renovation of the YMCA building and development of educational programming and exhibits. In the early 2000s, they hosted exhibits and programs that explored more relevant and interesting topics in Chester County history, such as an exhibit dedicated to the invention of the Slinky. These programs and exhibits were designed to engage their community and draw more visitors into the space with relevant and relatable topics. Another motivation for these engaging exhibitions was the decrease in government funding due in part to the attacks on September 11, 2001. The American economy managed to bounce back fairly soon after the attacks, but government spending for defense increased significantly to over \$2 trillion, which could have taken funding away from cultural and nonprofit organizations.⁵⁶ The director of educational programs, Bill Kashatus, was laid off shortly after the attacks because the Society no longer had the budget to keep him on staff.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁴Tom Linafelt, "Family Questions Society's Custodianship of Medal," *Daily Local News*, June 6, 1989.

⁵⁵Linafelt, "Family Questions Society's Custodianship of Medal."

⁵⁶Sarah A. Binder and Molly E. Reynolds, "20 years later: the lasting impact of 9/11 on Congress," *Brookings*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/20-years-later-the-lasting-impact-of-9-11-on-congress/>.

⁵⁷Susan Weidener, "Not just about History Anymore: The Chester County Historical Society Embraces a Mission: To be Relevant and Educational," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct 02, 2005,

Society managed to recover and continued to produce programs and exhibitions that made the history of Chester County more approachable to the community. The chairman of the Society's board in the early 2000s, Bruce Mowday, argued that ““history is not just what happened in the 17th and 18th centuries.””⁵⁸ By the end of the 2010s, CCHS had rebranded to become the Chester County History Center. It hoped that the name change would strengthen its mission to reach the community through relevant educational programs.

V. Analysis

Options for Historic House Museums

The primary reason for CCHS selling the Marshall property was funding. The endowment Weir left in his will did not entirely cover the costs of maintaining the Marshall property long term or the use of the house as a historic house museum. Also, a decrease in visitorship contributed to the funding issue. Jeff Groff, a former staff member and director of several historic house museums in southeastern Pennsylvania and Delaware, recalls a similar situation during his time as executive director of the Wyck Historic House in Germantown, Pennsylvania. The Germantown Historical Society maintained several historic houses, but the expenses of the properties grew at a time when visitor interest was declining. Like CCHS, they made the decision to sell the properties with preservation easements and consolidated their collections and other materials in a new building. Groff explains how the Germantown Historical Society's main purpose was to “best preserve local history while diversifying both collections and stories to reflect a demographic that was so different than the days of their founding in the

<https://login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/not-just-about-history-anymore/docview/1908632825/se-2>.

⁵⁸Weidener, “Not just about History Anymore.”

early 1900s.”⁵⁹ Groff also notes that although the Society did lose the support of longtime donors and families with connections to the houses, they still managed to reach a new audience and focus on their new goals of diversifying their collections and history through funding from new supporters and grants.⁶⁰

According to Groff’s own experience, CCHS was not the only historical society willing to sell its historic properties in order to update its collections and programming with the goal of increasing visitorship. However, both CCHS and the Germantown Historical Society were at the beginning of the trend to update the content of historical societies and place a stronger focus on educational programming for the community. Debbie Ann Doyle’s article, “The Future of Local Historical Societies,” cites a conference called the Kykuit II Summit held in 2007 that discussed the transformation of historical societies into community centers in the 21st century.⁶¹ Through sponsorship from national organizations like AAM, AASLH, NTHP, and the American Architectural Foundation, the Summit brought together many historic site leaders and representatives of service organizations with the goal of discussing possible solutions for the sustainability of historic sites.⁶² Doyle discusses the conference as a shift in the role of historical societies, but before its mention in the article, she only discusses the financial struggles of historical societies and small museums in the 20th century with no mention of any changing missions.

Unlike many of these struggling historical societies in the United States, CCHS had enough funding to purchase an additional building for its exhibitions and collections, but it still needed additional funding to renovate the space to include more educational programming.

⁵⁹Interview with Jeff Groff, March 11, 2023.

⁶⁰Interview with Jeff Groff, March 11, 2023.

⁶¹Doyle, “The Future of Local Historical Societies.”

⁶²Jay D. Vogt, “The Kykuit II Summit: The Sustainability of Historic Sites,” *History News* 62 (Autumn 2007), 17–21.

CCHS needed to adapt in order to combat the growing disinterest among visitors and remain relevant in its community. However, it is possible that because CCHS initiated this change in their mission before most other historical societies, the community members felt more confused and hurt by the Marshall house sale. Given the drastic nature of CCHS's change in mission, they should have been more open in the communication of their changing mission as well as the Marshall house sale.

With the issue of decreased audience interest and a lack of sufficient funding, historic house museums need new approaches to how they function in order to stay relevant and operational. Many historic house museums in the 21st century have implemented new programs and procedures with the intention of becoming more relevant to their local communities, even with their limited budgets. Some historic house museums have opened up their spaces for community and civic engagement programs. For example, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York offers English as a second language classes for its community members, and the Grumblethorpe Historic House Museum in Germantown, Pennsylvania have installed a vegetable garden to combat the neighborhood's food desert issue and involve the youth volunteers with its upkeep.⁶³

These solutions for historic house museums may not promote the collection of artifacts, but they do protect historic buildings from demolition and ensure that these properties remain relevant in their communities. These actions also encourage citizens to take an interest in the local history of their community. These types of programs offer community members an opportunity to share their stories of local history that previously might have been ignored or underrepresented in the historic house museum. Some of these programs may even cost less than focusing solely on restoring the property or staging it with historically accurate furnishings.

⁶³Vagnone and Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 50-53.

Another way historic house museums have adapted to increase visitor interest and relevance in their communities is through contemporary art installations. Instead of viewing historic houses as buildings frozen in the past, some historic house organizations have partnered with contemporary artists to change the way visitors see and interact with the space. The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (PSPL) has facilitated a number of events and projects in historic buildings. Candy DePew, a Pew Fellow artist, worked with PSPL to produce *Between Worlds*, an exhibition that placed the original collection of the Physick House and its rooms alongside her own creative artifacts.⁶⁴ In New York, the Merchant's House Museum temporarily installed neon chandeliers while the original bronze chandeliers from the 1850s underwent conservation.⁶⁵ To some visitors, these contemporary art installations might appear jarring in the context of 18th and 19th century historic homes, but others might find the new interpretation of the spaces intriguing. These installations do not damage the preservation but rather enhance the visitor experience by offering them the opportunity to view these spaces in a context that feels new. It challenges visitors to view the past through a contemporary lens and helps the older, sometimes tired interpretations of historic house museums feel new and exciting again. Some may view this as a degradation of the historic house's role to interpret the past, but partnerships with disciplines outside of history may help bring in audiences that would otherwise find these spaces too boring and academic.

In some situations, a historic house museum may not have the resources needed to remain relevant or operational within their community. In these cases, the board members of the historic house or the historical society that owns the property may need to consider the possibility of selling or donating the property. If the board members do not want to completely sell the

⁶⁴Vagnone and Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 151.

⁶⁵Vagnone and Ryan, *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, 154.

property to a private owner, they could lease the property to a private owner or organization, reducing their role to a titleholder for the property while the private owner seeks a different use for the property. With this possibility, the board still owns the historic house property and acts as a landlord to collect rent from the private owner. However, the leaseholder of the property has the right to determine how they would like to use the property going forward, which could affect interior or exterior features of the property.⁶⁶ If the board members determine that they can no longer hold onto the property in any capacity, they have options for who they can sell to. Whether they decide to sell to a private owner, a non-profit organization, or a government organization, they should make every effort to place protective easements on the property to ensure its preservation. Easements are legal agreements between a qualified organization and the owner of the historic property where the owner agrees to maintain the property forever without destroying or dividing it.⁶⁷ Although some might argue that the board members are failing in their mission to preserve and protect the historic property, it is likely that the private owner has more sufficient funds to take care of the property.

Regardless of how historic house museum board members choose to move forward with their properties, effective communication with community members will help the process go smoothly. Open communication with community members establishes trust and helps them to see that the board members of the historic house museum have the best interests for the property in mind. Another case similar to CCHS's sale of the Marshall house occurred with the Robert E. Lee Boyhood home owned by the Lee-Jackson Foundation in Virginia. In the 1990s, the interests of the Foundation changed, and they decided to sell the Lee Boyhood home and add the proceeds to a scholarship program.⁶⁸ The Foundation ended up selling the property to a local couple

⁶⁶Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 91-93.

⁶⁷Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 71.

⁶⁸Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 196-197.

without ever listing the house for sale, shocking the community. The public involved the attorney general to stop the sale, but the Foundation proceeded. After this incident, Virginia passed a state law requiring nonprofit owners to notify the office of the city, state, and attorney general ninety days prior to the sale of a historic property.⁶⁹ In this case, the Foundation's actions led to the development of a state law to ensure proper communication between community members and historical organizations. The sale of the Lee Boyhood home further emphasizes the need for open communication between a historical society and its community members.

Building Community Trust and Relationships

From a legal perspective, CCHS did not break any laws or legally binding contracts in selling the Marshall house because the correspondence between Weir and the Society was never probated in the will. Ethically, they broke the mutual understanding they had agreed to with Weir as a donor and therefore damaged their relationship with the community. The “AAM Code of Ethics for Museums” states that museums have a responsibility to uphold their integrity in addition to upholding legal standards so that they can maintain the confidence of the public. It also states that museums must put their loyalty to their mission and to the public first, even in the face of conflict.⁷⁰ Violations of ethical standards in the field of public history do not necessarily constitute legal punishment, but they can break down the trust that a historical society has worked hard to establish with its surrounding community. It is difficult and unproductive to label CCHS’s decision to sell as ethical or unethical because of the often ambiguous nature of ethics. Museums and historical societies have to use the practice of deaccessioning, sometimes through sale or donation, to ensure the protection and longevity of their collections. Regardless of whether or not their decision held up in a courtroom, CCHS could have taken steps to help the

⁶⁹Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums*, 197.

⁷⁰“AAM Code of Ethics for Museums.”

community see that the sale of the Marshall house was also in the best interest of the community and the Historical Society's mission.

Besides the issue of ethics, this incident with CCHS brings up the question of open communication and shared authority between historical institutions and the local community. CCHS did not give the community enough time to voice their concerns about the sale of the Marshall property and other historic house properties. The community felt CCHS left them in the dark on an important decision regarding their local history. According to J. Boylston Campbell, “[CCHS] [wanted] to get [the sale] done before the end of the month. Four weeks is not long enough to muster up public opinion.”⁷¹ If CCHS had made the decision public sooner, the community members could have voiced their concerns about the sale, and CCHS could have addressed these issues. Some people would likely still oppose the sale and feel hurt, but CCHS could have avoided much of the negative backlash in the press as well as going to court over the issue. CCHS succeeded in selling the Marshall house and surrounding property to a private buyer with protective easements, but as a result, many community members lost trust in CCHS's ability to safeguard their history. Weir's family even wanted to take back other family artifacts that Weir had donated alongside the Marshall house because of the sale.

Public historians have a responsibility to collect and preserve history even more so than academic historians because they directly work in and communicate with local communities. Oftentimes, public historians struggle with surrendering some of their control when it comes to the interpretation and preservation of history because it goes against the training they received during their time in academia.⁷² While public historians may have considerable knowledge of the local history in their communities, it is important that they recognize the unique perspectives that

⁷¹Linafelt, “Plan To Sell Historic Home Raises Ire.”

⁷²Corbett and Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” 36.

the community members contribute as well. This does not mean that public historians should leave the integrity and mission to interpret history entirely to the public, but rather they should share the authority with their communities and work together to preserve the local history.⁷³ In the case of the Marshall house, the community felt that the property represented a unique and vital aspect of Chester County's history and that CCHS, as the premiere historical institution for Chester County, should maintain ownership of the property. CCHS felt that the property did not contribute any major significance to their new mission of educational programming and believed the property would fare better with private ownership. Practicing shared authority by allowing community members to contribute to the new educational programs could help rebuild the trust between CCHS and the community.

Although public historians should practice more shared authority at their local history sites, community members should acknowledge the authority that public historians have in the fields of preservation and interpretation of history. The emotional attachments that communities have to artifacts and stories of the past can sometimes cloud their judgment because to them, these items represent heritage instead of history. Heritage and history usually exist in separate worlds, as history tends to be a narrative while heritage offers a tangible, inherited view of the past.⁷⁴ Members of Chester County saw Humphry Marshall as a pivotal figure of their community's heritage, which could have eclipsed the reality of how expensive it would be to operate his house as a museum or for CCHS to maintain it as part of its collection. CCHS also wanted to tell the entire story of Chester County's rich history through their programming and not focus all of its resources on Humphry Marshall. History and heritage often come into conflict with each other, with community members fighting to protect their heritage on one side and

⁷³Gardner, "Contested Terrain," 14.

⁷⁴Corbett and Miller, "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry," 22.

public historians fighting to present their interpretation of history on the other. However, history and heritage do not always have to oppose each other. If the community can acknowledge the authority public historians have as interpreters of history and public historians acknowledge the attachments community members have to their heritage, the two groups can effectively work together to preserve local history with minimal conflict.

Additionally, communities should recognize that historical societies have expanded beyond their original mission to collect artifacts and buildings related to local history. It might be difficult, but the community needs to see how museums and local history institutions want to focus more on the significant and meaningful issues in history instead of only focusing on artifact collection and verification.⁷⁵ Communities have viewed historical societies in particular as organizations that collect and preserve rather than interpret history, but in the early 21st century, historical societies want to play a more active role in community history. CCHS wanted to be more than just a repository of valuable Chester County properties and artifacts, and expanding their educational programming and exhibitions would allow them to grow as a history institution and contribute more to their community. In this way, CCHS saw the change in their mission as a benefit to their community instead of an act of betrayal. Breaking away from tradition, especially tradition that has existed for close to a hundred years, can be difficult for people to accept, but if public historians at local institutions are willing to listen to the opinions and concerns of their communities, the communities should have an open mind and trust the public historians on issues of change.

Despite the protests and complaints of community members, CCHS went through with the sale and used the funds to expand their educational programming. It is clear that this incident damaged the trust members had in the Society, and broken trust is not always easily repaired.

⁷⁵Gardner, "Contested Terrain," 15.

However, CCHS managed to continue its mission, introducing new exhibitions and programming in the early 2000s and rebranding their name in 2020. Some individuals, specifically those from the Weir and Marshall families, may still harbor resentment towards CCHS for the decisions it made, but overall CCHS remains active and dedicated to serving its members and the rest of the community. Perhaps if CCHS had approached the sale of the Marshall house differently, they could have avoided the lawsuit and worked together with the Marshall family to come up with a better solution. However, the relationships between historical societies and their communities are complex and there is no definite sense of right and wrong when it comes to making these decisions.

VI. Conclusion

Historical societies and other local history institutions perform a balancing act with every decision they make. They must remain loyal and dedicated to their established mission, but they must also maintain the trust of the community that they serve. Sometimes, these two duties come into conflict with each other and can result in the community losing trust in the institution. While it is sometimes difficult to see the consequences of this broken trust, it can result in the loss of important donors and the community's desire to take back artifacts from the institution's collection. In order to prevent these consequences and keep the trust of the community, historical societies should strive for open communication and practice shared authority with their community, especially when making significant changes to their collections or mission statements. In return, the residents of the community should acknowledge that historical societies usually have the best interests of the community in mind in the cases of preserving and interpreting history.

Public historians often have a greater responsibility than academic historians when it comes to preserving and interpreting history because of their relationship with community residents. With the field of public history constantly changing, public historians face challenges as they adapt and seek to remain relevant in their communities. Understanding the consequences of breaking trust with their communities and the methods that can help reduce the risk of disappointing the community helps public historians and their institutions continue to survive and grow. It is also important to understand that incidents like the one involving CCHS can differ depending on the institution, and there is no one solution that fits all institutions. Using these suggestions as a guideline can help struggling historical societies and institutions avoid alienating their communities and strengthen their relationships. Historical societies are done serving as the community's attics, and with good communication and shared authority, they can help their communities understand the need to change their mission without major conflict.

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Appendix



Photograph of the Humphry Marshall house in 1893

Cope, Gilbert, photographer. "Home of Humphrey Marshall, in Marshallton." Photograph. 1893.

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