

Add Women and Stir?: Interpretation of Gender in House Museums

Based on recent scholarship on interpretation in house museums, academic social history, summed up in the three big themes of race, class, and gender, has become more common in public history contexts. However, it seems that these three topics are not integrated equally at sites. On a recent tour of six house museums in the cities of Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia, gender was noticeably less interpreted than issues of race or class. In the web of relationships that exist within a home, those between men and women were not considered as often as relationships between masters and slaves or between upper and lower classes. Gender history was more or less completely absent even at the few sites that discussed women at any length. This statement may beg the question, “what is the difference between women’s history and gender history?” Women’s history looks at what specific women did in the past as well as what women’s daily lives were like while gender history takes these concepts a little further in order to understand why women’s, as well as men’s, lives were structured the way they were. Gender history looks at the relationship between men and women as well as how other statuses affected the construction of gender, such as race or class. In other words, gender history seeks to understand what the underlying reasons were for differences in male and female experiences. Gender history answers questions such as why were middle class white women expected to behave a certain way while working class women were held to different expectations? What did people of the past see as the fundamental differences between men and women and how did that influence their daily roles?

Most of the houses we visited lacked even the most basic form of women’s history, neglecting to mention specific women by name and relegating women’s lives to certain spaces and less time in the tour rather than fully integrating their experiences. Those sites that did

interpret women's history still did not push to answer underlying questions of gender or explore the relationship between men and women. This "add women and stir" method, which was the most common approach at the sites in Charleston and Savannah, attempts to introduce women's voices to the interpretation by inserting a few token women's activities into the story of the house and the uses of the rooms. This approach is successful in at least bringing attention to the fact that women lived in and used the spaces on tour. However, what this method lacks is a real understanding of gender differences and the relationships between men and women.

The other common issue in interpretation of gender is getting past a need to fill in the gaps that remain from androcentric (male-centered) approaches to the past. At some sites that interpret a specific woman the house becomes the kind of shrine that is usually associated with great white men. In some ways, this seems fair and it is important to share the stories of women who stood out; however, by building shrines to notable women, the stories of the majority of women are obscured. Both of these approaches to women's history were represented on tours in Charleston and Savannah. Of the six sites we visited, only two went beyond mere mentions of women. However, even these sites did not offer a more complete gender history. The Isaiah Davenport House and the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, both in Savannah, are different in terms of time period and main interpretive goals; however, they were the two tours that were most inclusive of women's history and had the most potential for expanding their understanding of gender. In describing the way these two sites interpreted women we can see where the sites may have missed opportunities to develop their representation of women into a more complicated interpretation of gender.



The Isaiah Davenport House, like most house museums, is male-centric even in name. The museum's interpretive goal is to show what life was like in the 1820s for the Davenport family, a middle class family headed by a master craftsman. Overall, the tour was very well done. However, what life was like at that time for women was not as clearly established. Women's history was mostly relegated to one room of the house, what the guide called the "morning room", and which also happened to be the smallest room in the house. *In this image, the morning room is the small alcove area at the far end of the room.* This space was set up to interpret Sarah Davenport's role as mother and educator of her children. The guide even explained that only elite women would have been educated. However, this fact is not explicitly compared to men's lives. Were women less likely to be educated than men of all classes and why? The role of women as moral mothers in the home is touched upon but not explained or put

into context. This was a time when middle class women were becoming more involved in reform issues outside the home as their domestic moral role began to expand to include not just their own family but society at large. However, this concept is not discussed. Furthermore, this room introduced the fact that women were often those in charge of the enslaved workers on a daily basis, but this complicated relationship is not fully explored. Thus, this room presents excellent opportunities to discuss issues of gender but does not follow through.



Another space in the house which seemed suited for interpretation of gender was the bedroom of a female child. Differences in appropriate behavior for male versus female children as well as how children were prepared for adulthood based on gender might have been useful topics to pursue in the room. Instead an unduly large amount of time was spent discussing one type of silhouette portrait.



The master bedroom also presented opportunities to interpret gender history. The tour used the room to discuss issues of class and illness, explaining why a room most would consider private was still designed as extravagantly as the more public rooms. This was due to the fact that middle class and elite families would have visitors at their sickbeds. However, as the bedroom of both Isaiah and Sarah Davenport, the room is definitely a space where both genders interacted and could be a prime point in the tour to compare the two's daily activities as well as a space to discuss issues of marriage. What customs or ideas influenced how and when people married at that time? These missed opportunities to expand on gender issues prevented this tour from fully living up to its interpretive goal to interpret life in the house. Life for women and girls is not fully represented nor is it put into context or comparison with the lives of men and boys.



Houses that tell the story of a famous woman seem at first glance to be a hotbed for gender history; however, these sites tend to present a great woman history. The Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace, which interprets the home of the Girl Scout founder, is a site where one might expect to find a wealth of refreshing gender history. However, that is not the case. As a site for current Girl Scouts, the museum's goal seems to be to empower young girls, an excellent aim. The tour instead comes across as a list of the skills and accomplishments of a woman who is not placed in context. If the tour had compared Low to other, less notable women of the time her abilities and accomplishments would have been even more pronounced and inspiring. The tour had a couple of missed opportunities that were particularly glaring. In one room, the founding of the Girl Scouts is discussed; however, the guide did not explain why Low felt the organization was needed or why the Boy Scouts were founded first. This point in the tour would have been an excellent time to discuss society's expectations for boys and girls and how they differed.





Another missed opportunity at the Low Birthplace was a discussion of the female servants who worked there. As I mentioned, comparing Low to “average” women would put her in context and highlight why her work was so notable. It would also educate visitors on what the lives of the majority of women were like. *The tour very briefly mentions servants in connection with the bell pulls in the house, much like the one pictured.* The tour might instead use these bell pulls as a segue into a more thorough description of servants’ lives and a comparison between them and Low’s own life.

Overall, the lack of any depth of women's history at most of the sites we visited was alarming. These two sites are already taking a step in the right direction by striving to include women's voices and tell about their lives. These sites should look for more opportunities to go beyond merely adding in women's experiences by drawing comparisons between men's and women's lives and teaching visitors about why these differences existed.