

The Importance of

# MISSION

in Guiding

# MUSEUM

# PRACTICE

Essays from the 2002 series

3 X 3: Workshops for Museum and  
Not-for-Profit Leaders

Museum Association of New York



Funded by the  
New York State Council on the Arts







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RESERVATION RESEARCH GOALS  
PURPOSE AUDIENCE  
VISION INSPIRATION  
NARRATIVE COLLABORATION  
TOURISM MISSION HISTORY  
CHANGE INTERPRETATION  
RESTORATION PROFIT ASSESSMENT

# The Importance of MISSION in Guiding MUSEUM PRACTICE

Essays from the 2002 series  
3 X 3: Workshops for Museum and  
Not-for-Profit Leaders

Edited by  
Joan H. Baldwin  
Anne W. Ackerson

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Museum Association of New York



Funded by the  
New York State Council on the Arts



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Dear Colleague,

The Museum Association of New York is pleased to present the second set of papers from its Fall 2002 workshop series, **3 X 3: Workshops for Museum and Not-for-Profit Leaders**. This set, *The Importance of Mission in Guiding Museum Practice*, discusses the benefits of developing and implementing a clear, meaningful mission. Each essay offers sound advice for organizations of any size when approaching mission refinement. The accompanying CD provides an array of mission, vision, and values statements from MANY member institutions, and the resource list provides a variety of ways to obtain additional information.

As educational institutions, museums are centered on ideas and learning. Increasingly, the demands of audience development and funding that museums face in the 21st century bring with them great pressure to revise and reinvent

institutional visions and missions. When done well, the process creates a fertile environment for organizational growth and renewed engagement among boards, staff, volunteers, and their communities. We hope this set of materials will facilitate your museum's discussions as you seek to create or reinvigorate your educational role.

We are indebted to our series authors, to Management Consultants for the Arts and to Qm2 for Nonprofit Organizations: Quality Management to a Higher Power for allowing us to reprint essays from their web sites, to Joan Baldwin for developing and coordinating the workshops and the monograph series, and to the New York State Council on the Arts for funding this project.

Sincerely,  
Anne W. Ackerson, Director



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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## Kinshasha Holman Conwill

Kinshasha Holman Conwill is an arts and management consultant. She is currently project director for *A Cultural Blueprint for New York City*, an initiative of the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the managing editor of its publication, *Culture Counts: Strategies for a More Vibrant Cultural Life for New York City*. She is Chairman of the National Museum Services Board, the former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and a former commissioner of the Accreditation Commission of the American Association of Museums. She writes on contemporary art and is a frequent lecturer, panelist, and juror.

## John Durel

John Durel has spent more than thirty years learning how to help people in organizations do better work. He has held leadership positions within organizations, where he has focused on developing the abilities of individuals to work effectively with others. As a consultant he designs and facilitates processes that enable organizations and individuals to manage change and achieve their goals. After receiving his PhD in American History in 1984, Durel took a position as Assistant Director of the Baltimore City Life Museums, an institution that was undergoing rapid growth. In 1995 Durel stepped up to the position of Executive Director of the Baltimore City Life Museums. Drawing on the lessons of Baltimore and his years of experience leading staff through change, Durel joined Qm2 in 1996. As a consultant he assists organizations in developing realistic plans for future growth; he educates and coaches staff to become more effective leaders; and he helps to create innovative exhibits and programs.

## Kristin Herron

Kristin Herron is the Director of the Museum Program of the New York State Council on the Arts, where she has worked for over six years, previously as Program Officer for Museums. Trained in American material culture/decorative arts and

creative writing, Kristin has worked for the National Park Service, as Curator of Thomas Edison's home, Glenmont, for historical societies in Maine and Delaware, the Winterthur Museum, and the Michigan Artrain, the nation's only art museum on a train. Consulting work in historic house interpretation and furnishings studies has focused on New England sites. Kristin has attended the Attingham Summer School for the Study of the British Country House, the Seminar for Historical Administration at Colonial Williamsburg, and joined other American museum professionals in a delegation to meet with colleagues in Northern Ireland, under the auspices of the British Council. She has been a reviewer for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and the Museum Assessment Program's Institutional Assessment.

## Liselle LaFrance

Liselle LaFrance is Director of Historic Cherry Hill in Albany, a historic house museum with intact collections of 20,000 objects, 30,000 manuscripts, 7,500 textiles, 5,000 books and 3,000 photographs, spanning five generations of the Van Rensselaer family. Her institution's reinterpretive project was the subject of a review in the June 2003 *Journal of American History*. She serves as a Visiting Committee member for the Accreditation Program of the American Association of Museums (AAM), on the Review Panel for the General Operating Support Program of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and as a Museum Assessment Program (MAP) I and III reviewer for AAM and IMLS.

## Liz Sevckenko, PhD

Liz Sevckenko is Vice President of Programs for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. Completing her PhD in American history at New York University, she has most recently published "The Making of Loisaïda" in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City* (Columbia University Press, July 2001). In

her career as a public historian, Sevckenko has pioneered in exploring contemporary issues through a historic lens. At the Tenement Museum, Ms. Sevckenko has directed several initiatives to bring history to bear on discussions on pressing social issues and projects to address them. Sevckenko has consulted with various historic sites and networks of cultural institutions, including the Paso Al Norte Immigration History Center in El Paso, TX and the Sanford Ziff Museum in Miami, FL. As Coordinator of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, Ms. Sevckenko works with the directors of historic sites around the world, building their capacity to use their histories to address contemporary issues. The Coalition is currently consulting with the National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the National Trust of Britain on how to develop sites of conscience initiatives within their networks.

## Nicholas Westbrook

Nicholas Westbrook has been Director of Fort Ticonderoga since 1989, and was elected a Trustee of the Fort Ticonderoga Association in 2000. During his tenure, the museum's annual operating budget has tripled and the endowment quintupled. He led the planning for the state-of-the-art collections care facility, the Thompson-Pell Research Center, which opened in 1992. Restoration of the King's Garden, "a masterwork American Garden" (1920) was completed in 2000 and has received several awards for the research and skill of its recreation. Today the museum is embarking on the reconstruction of the last "missing" barracks around the parade ground. Opening in 2005, the new Mars Education Center will transform the educational potential of the museum. Westbrook served as a member of the Board of the Federation of Historical Services in the Capital District from 1990-1995. He joined the board of the Museum Association of New York in 1995, and became its president in 2001.

# INTRODUCTION

Kristin Herron, Director

Museum Program, New York State Council on the Arts

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**W**hen you sit down to read a book, the first sentence is critical. Well-crafted, it can succinctly, magically, draw you in to the story. Particularly skilled writers invite you into the narrative you're about to devote hours to, in a way that makes you crave the time to become enveloped in another world. Without that hook, that engagement, it's much more difficult to want to be involved, and to stay with the text. Charles Dickens knew this, as evidenced in his classic, oft-partially quoted first sentence to *Tale of Two Cities*:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so.*

Dickens' opening lines shows us that in the era of the French Revolution nothing is static and everything is complex. The result is a compelling story with lasting relevance.

So it should be with mission statements.

The five authors in this publication demonstrate the importance of mission in useful, related ways. From

**Regardless of the size of your institution or the focus of your collections, whether you receive more visitors than you can manage, or very few at all, it's time to rethink your mission.**

Kinshasha Holman Conwill's musings on the importance of mission in a changed world, to John Durel's practical exercise on smartly applying mission to the "bottom line," the essayists all reflect on change—that change is not only good, but essential. Each study takes you through necessary institutional change that led three historic sites to rethink their purpose, to refocus their direction, and, ultimately, better help them tell engaging, informative and relevant stories.

Liz Sevckenko writes of the holistic approach of the staff of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM) in assuring that everything it does starts with mission. Sounds simple? Obvious? Maybe so, but few institutions apply this as thoughtfully and thoroughly as Sevckenko describes the method at LESTM. The importance of





regular reconsideration of mission, as tied to long-range planning, is carefully detailed in Nick Westbrook's examination of the evolution of Fort Ticonderoga's mission—how it reflects the individuals involved, new acquisitions, further scholarship and, implicitly, the museum field's own development in struggling with the role and purpose of mission. Narrative as a tool, and its engaging connection to audience is clearly articulated through the example of Historic Cherry Hill. Liselle LaFrance shows how the staff and consultants spent years in crafting a mission based in storytelling, that connects visitors intellectually as well as emotionally.

To continue the metaphor I started with, it's said that there are only about seven plots upon which all of the world's tales are structured. (Although this is, admittedly, controversial.) But, rather than stop with only seven stories, writers over centuries have retooled those plots—whether “updating” Shakespeare, or retelling a classic from another character's perspective. That's what's going on with mission statements. The framework may well be familiar, but to relate to a modern world, and connect to new audiences, the shape of the language changes in important, engaging, and defining ways. There are lessons in each of these essays, and clear guidance in making change at your own organization. Regardless of the size of your institution or the focus of your collections, whether you receive more visitors than you can manage, or very few at all, it's time to rethink your mission. This book will give you the inspiration and tools to shape a mission statement that not only summarizes who your institution is, but draws the visitor in for a sustained, and meaningful stay. 🌿

Kinshasha Holman Conwill

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*Where there is no vision, the people perish*

Proverbs xxix 18

*Love is not love,*

*which alters when it alteration finds*

William Shakespeare

**T**he vision that guides an arts institution resonates in its mission—the words, whether simply stated or poetic, that announce to a variety of audiences, the intentions of a museum, a dance company, a theater, an orchestra, a visual or presenting arts organization. Without a clear sense of mission and the vision to animate it, an institution may not necessarily perish as the biblical admonition warns, but it will surely falter. And while mission may not be Shakespeare’s “ever fixed mark”—it is a solid and reliable guide that should be altered consciously and not abridged lightly.

What is an organizational mission? Is it the benchmark for all that an institution does? A compass to guide its operations and programs? The basis of inspiration and aspiration? The solid foundation upon which all else is built?

This is both a fitting and poignant time to revisit mission, with all of its implications of self-examination. In good times, mission secures what a museum or performing arts organization does as it goes about its daily work; in troubling times, it becomes a reminder of what lasts. Mission connects us to the essential aspects of our artistic purpose and our role in public service: our collections, our programs, and our audiences. Indeed, it is a relationship-definer. It helps us to answer the questions: What do we value? What do we hold in trust, and for whom?

In calmer times we often worry about “mission creep” or the overly broad mission that allows anything and everything to become our work and blurs our institutional vision. An unclear mission is the culprit in many an unguided art acquisition, an overly-full program schedule, and programs lacking coherence or an authentic voice. In these very different and difficult times, an exploration of the role of mission, and our missions as individual organizations, leads us to a deeper examination of why we do, what we do.

**This is both a fitting and poignant time to revisit mission, with all of its implications of self-examination.**

Why does what we do in the arts matter? What is important? What endures? The work of human creation, in its myriad forms, marks us as different from the rest of our glorious universe. Our very intentionality affirms our humanity. The arts and cultural organizations that present, interpret, and preserve the work of human imagination are thus fundamental entities. Their presence, growth, development, and constant re-energizing of the ideas they embody is vital to maintaining communities, providing learning experiences for all ages, and enriching our lives.



A museum of jazz makes possible a deeper understanding of one of the world's great musical innovations. A classical ballet company insures that new generations will have their hearts lifted or their blood stirred by the abstract concepts of individual genius made visible. An alternative space offers provocative exhibitions and public arts that engage our senses and our sensibilities.

Such ambitions and value require guiding forces, compasses to aid navigation in good times and bad, in times of certainty and times of upheaval. Institutional mission, a touchstone in stable periods, becomes indispensable in times of a precarious global economy, social disruption, and widespread feelings of unease. Whether a theater company is deciding to purchase its first permanent home or a museum is already in

each of us as individuals. In the wake of recent events, renewal is a critical step in rebuilding shattered lives, neighborhoods, and our deepest collective feelings of worth and meaning.


It is therefore fitting that the work for an organization's purpose—mission—takes on a spiritual tone. Definitions of mission speak of vocation and journeys undertaken. An arts group's journey is a promising process of discovery and enlightenment with a sound mission as its guide. If the soul of a dance company or an artists' space is the program it creates and presents, then mission is a catalyst that activates the soul's expression. A company that presents the work of an innovative 20th-century playwright cannot give life to that art if it is distracted or seduced by the latest trends in market-driven programming. At such times, the "fixed mark" of mission can be the saving grace for sound decisions.

## **The renewal of mission—usually in the context of long range planning—is as critical to an artistic body as self-renewal is to each of us as individuals.**

the process of renovating existing space, mission is the starting place to return to again, and again. It grounds the choice of two organizations considering consolidation into one. It precedes design plans for a new performing arts center. And in times of hard fiscal choices, its review is the first step in making difficult, but necessary, budgetary choices.

Yet mission is not magic. Unless its original concept is understood and embraced by those at every level of an organization—board, staff, volunteers, and increasingly, the organization's communities—it will not stand as the essential foundation, but may become instead, a collection of words without underlying meaning. And unless it is regularly reexamined, it cannot be the "evergreen" source of imagination and aspiration that reverberates in all aspects of an organization's programs and activities. The renewal of mission—usually in the context of long range planning—is as critical to an artistic body as self-renewal is to

In a time when many of us have come to question our very existence and value as arts organizations, it is not surprising that institutional mission can become the unwitting victim of fear and the need to survive. It is that very uncertainty, however, that allows us to better see mission's vital role in making our organizations authentic and lasting.

A question asked in the wake of the horrible events of September 11 still haunts me: "When is it okay to dream again?" I believe the answer is: Now. And as our dreams unfold, I trust that we will find that core ideas that give our dreams their potential for realization—our missions—are both anchor and inspiration. After September 11, in the wake of such incomprehensible events, we asked ourselves if our organizations were too "precious". Upon reflection, we realize that our organizations and their missions are indeed precious, in the most profound sense of the word. 

# PUTTING MISSION FIRST

Liz Sevchenko, Vice President

Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY



**M**ost museums are born from stuff. We acquire a singular collection of Dutch time pieces; we uncover the remains of an old flour mill. We're then forced to define why and how we will preserve and interpret them for the public. Often, we focus on tending to our artifacts and leave the question of why for later.

Consider another approach: what if the why came first? When the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM) was born, it had no stuff at all. Instead, it was born with an idea: to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America. Only after years of searching, the directors found the perfect artifact to fulfill their mission: a 5-story tenement that was home to nearly 7,000 immigrants from 20 different nations from 1863 to 1935.

At the Tenement Museum, our mission statement is what structures every aspect of our institution's work, from hiring practices to staff training to education programs. We use it every day, to generate support from our public, to plan our next steps, and to evaluate whether we're succeeding in fulfilling our goals.

## Applying the Mission Externally: Interpretation and Education

The Tenement Museum interprets the lives of the families who lived in 97 Orchard Street between 1863 and 1935 by recreating their apartments at a single

moment in that family's life. Of the 7,000 immigrants who passed through the building, how do we choose whom to interpret? Recently, the museum developed an interpretive vision statement to answer that question. We brought together staff and board members to develop a specific set of criteria for choosing stories to tell. We began with our mission statement. Charged with the mission to present "the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences," we decided to be sure to select families representing different time periods, ethnicities, religions, and experiences. How do we go about telling their stories? And since our primary goal is "to promote tolerance," we pledged to identify ongoing issues we wanted to address—like immigration, social responsibility, and housing standards—and look for families whose stories could inspire us to consider our actions and attitudes towards these issues today.

Each of our tours invites visitors to explore how people of different ethnicities and different generations shared parallel experiences, and consider how the questions they faced remain unresolved today. On one tour, we introduce two families struggling to make ends meet and be accepted in America during economic crises. Visitors meet Nathalie Gumpertz, a German single mother who struggled to raise her three children as a dressmaker after her husband abandoned her after the Panic of 1873, and who fought to maintain her right to speak German in the face of the first English-only law to be introduced in the United States. Next they visit the Sicilian Baldizzi family, who went to great lengths to enter the country illegally, only to be forced to go on government relief during the Depression.



Our newest tour brings visitors to two families toiling in the business that has been a source of promise and sorrow to immigrants for more than a century. Picking their way through piles of fabric they meet Harris and Jennie Levine, Russian immigrants who opened a dressmaking shop with three employees in their tenement apartment in 1892, creating the very type of space the word “sweatshop” was, in that moment, coined to describe. After hearing of all the reforms introduced to eradicate sweatshops, visitors tour the Rogarshevsky family apartment as it looked in 1918, and hear how Abraham, who worked as a presser in a new modern factory, nevertheless fell victim to tuberculosis, alternately called the “tailor’s disease” or the “Jewish disease.”

## We constantly review our work against our mission and look for new ways to meet it.

We use these stories as starting points for public dialogues about issues visitors deal with today, issues that relate to how they interact with each other and with other immigrants. Building on their own experiences as well as their personal reactions to the tours, visitors discuss such questions as: Who should be allowed to come to America? Who should decide? On what basis? What assistance should we provide?

The Levine family sweatshop is the most recent “exhibit” to open at 97 Orchard Street. Today, there are more than 400 garment shops still operating on the Lower East Side, and the debate still rages over what a sweatshop is, what should be done to address labor abuses, and who is responsible.

Shortly after the exhibit opened, the museum invited manufacturers, designers like Toys R Us and Levis, union organizers like UNITE, human rights groups like the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights, and contractors like the Kings County Contractors Association to a summit about the garment industry’s past, and its future. The conversation started with a visit to the Levines’ home, where participants placed themselves in the shoes of the first people to own,

operate, and work in a “sweatshop”, asking themselves the same questions the Levines would have asked.

They also saw how the decisions of policy makers and reformers impact the lives of ordinary people. These participants were people, we discovered as we struggled to put together the event, who would not easily sit at a table together. But they felt comfortable at the museum, saying “the museum provides a neutral environment that facilitates discussion among diverse, often conflicting sectors of our industry. It provides a wonderful opportunity to look at all of these issues together.” Since then, the Tenement Museum has hosted dozens of dialogues among and across garment industry groups.

We had also observed that recent arrivals to New York were deeply inspired by stories of struggle and triumph of earlier generations of immigrants. So we created the first Immigrant Programs Department at a National Historic Site where we teach English to immigrants around the city. Our class brings together immigrants from Madagascar to Myanmar to “meet” their historic counterparts, like Nathalie, Josephine, and Fannie. “I not only learned English,” one graduate said, “I learned I was not alone.” Graduates of the program become history ambassadors, learning to give tours of the museum in English and their own languages to their own immigrant communities and to all our visitors.

Learning how immigrants navigated New York in the past, our immigrant students protested the lack of basic information about rights and resources available to new arrivals today. In response, the museum and its students have partnered with *The New York Times* to produce the first ever “Immigrant Guide to New York City”. To be published initially in English, Spanish, and Chinese, the guide will inform as well as inspire, containing critical information and resources for navigating New York City, as well as moving testimony from both our own English students and from immigrants past.

Whether their families arrived in America yesterday or generations ago, we feel it’s important that our visitors know our mission and share our passion for it. We print our mission prominently on our promotional

material. We state the mission at the beginning or the end of every tour. It is the most effective way of selling memberships we have. Visitors support an institution whose purpose they understand and are inspired by—they want to be a part of a greater goal.

## Applying the Mission Internally: Staff Hiring and Training

The museum works hard to apply its mission to its internal practices as much as to its external programming. We simply wouldn't be able to apply the mission if our organization didn't reflect it. All of our staff can recite our mission by heart—no matter what their position, each employee knows why they are coming to work and how their job fulfills a larger purpose.

All of our staff gives tours of the museum once a week, reminding them how their work contributes to offering visitors a moving experience. We make every effort to bring the “variety of immigrant and migrant experiences” into our offices, hiring staff who speak Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin (the languages spoken by the largest numbers of immigrants in our area today), as well as French, German, and Russian. All of us are encouraged to share our own family immigration stories—whether they took place a few years or a few generations ago—with our visitors on our tours.

Each week, we bring all staff together for continuing education in a variety of fields. Scholars deliver lectures on the latest work in the history we interpret, and facilitate discussions about what that history suggests about issues we grapple with today. Staff has the chance to have the conversations and wrestle with issues in which they then engage our visitors. We also invite people—leaders of immigrant service organizations, or public health initiatives, or garment industry groups—to come and speak to our staff about how the issues we interpret historically manifest themselves today. Finally, we provide skills training that helps staff work better with each other and with visitors in a variety of ways: recent trainings have included public speaking, customer service, management, and working with people with disabilities. Through all of these

activities, we work to promote tolerance among our staff, so that they may better encourage it in our visitors.

## Developing and Applying a Mission Statement

What does a mission statement need to contain? The reason our staff, board, and supporters rally around our mission so strongly is that explains what we do, how we do it, and why. We could have decided our mission was simply “to present and interpret the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side.” But this is difficult to get up in the morning to do. What purpose does it serve? Alternatively, we could have decided our mission was simply, “to promote tolerance.” But how would we have any idea where to begin?

How do we use our mission statement in our day-to-day operations? In general we use it to decide what to do, and to generate support for what we do. Each year, every department starts their planning process with the mission. Because a mission is meant to be a lofty, expansive statement that endures over time, departments use it to generate more concrete goals to guide their work—goals that answer the question, “what would it look like, exactly, if I were fulfilling the mission in my department?” These goals become the specific criteria against which their work is measured.

We constantly review our work against our mission and look for new ways to meet it. Recently, we conducted an assessment of all of our education programs. We identified criteria that articulated what our programming should do to successfully fulfill our mission. We hired an outside evaluator and conducted internal evaluations to determine whether we were meeting those criteria. We even surveyed our visitors. After they finished their tour, we asked whether they felt their tour “promoted tolerance and historical perspective?” Despite our dedication to our mission, we had not used it to do a thorough assessment of our programs for a number of years. We discovered many areas in which we still had a long way to go in fulfilling it. This evaluation renewed our belief in the importance of regularly measuring our work against our highest goal: our mission. 🌱



# THE EVOLVING MISSION OF FORT TICONDEROGA, 1931-2003: A CASE STUDY

Nicholas Westbrook, Director  
Fort Ticonderoga

**T**he dramatic progress made by board and staff at Fort Ticonderoga during the past 15 years has come about through systematic long-range planning and recurring re-examination of the mission of the managing organization, the Fort Ticonderoga Association. We believe that mission and planning are symbiotically related, and that both need continual and regular renewal.

Some of our museum colleagues argue that mission should be chiseled in granite, and only rarely revised. On the contrary, we believe firmly in the importance of a regular reaffirmation and nuanced restatement of mission as the necessary foundation for our iterative cycles of long-range planning. We have found that revisiting mission leads to a shared—and therefore healthier—sense of organizational purpose. That, in turn, shapes our planning.

A close examination and revision of the museum's mission, resulting in lodestone documents that have evolved in interesting ways has preceded each planning effort. Today the core mission of the Fort Ticonderoga Association certainly remains true to the Association's founding in 1931: preservation and interpretation of the historic 18th-century fort. But the periodic revisions in the mission statement reflect (a) a broadening awareness of the significance of the site and its

resources, and (b) some subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in how we declare our purposes to the world. In examining the evolution of the museum's mission, and the changing voices that framed its mission statements every five years, we can see its transition from "founderitis" to a broader scope and audience. At the same time, it remains loyal to its founding principles.

Fort Ticonderoga has been an historic preservation project of the Pell family since 1820, the first such private commitment in the country, preventing further depredation of the site while permitting public access. In 1908 the Pells began restoring the Fort, gathering museum collections, and protecting the viewshed surrounding the historic Garrison Grounds. The first portion of the restoration was opened to the public and dedicated by President William Howard Taft in 1909. Management of the restored Fort and its collections continued as a family avocation until 1931, when the museum founders, Stephen H.P. and Sarah G.T. Pell, transferred the site and its collections to the not-for-profit Fort Ticonderoga Association so that the preservation of Fort Ticonderoga would survive in perpetuity. It is important to remember that, when President Taft celebrated the Pell's commitment to restoring Fort Ticonderoga, creating the National Park Service was almost a decade in the future, and Colonial Williamsburg restoration still a generation over the horizon.

One may fairly assume that the statement of mission embedded in the 1931 Articles of Incorporation represents the vision of Stephen and Sarah Pell as it had evolved during their own quarter-century-old commitment to the historic site, building upon the family's then 110-year old tradition of preservation and access:

*1. To establish a non-partisan, non-sectarian, historical organization for the maintenance and preservation of landmarks of early American history within or without the State of New York; to care for, preserve, maintain and improve historical monuments, structures, tombs, fences, walks, burial plots and graves; to receive, collect, purchase or otherwise acquire or dispose of any and all types of documents, books, portraits, pamphlets, letters, curios, instruments, equipment, relics and all other items of historical significance in relation to early American history; to build, equip and maintain a library of books, papers, documents and all related materials for the advancement and study of the religious, social, political, military and geographic problems and background of the early history of the United States; to publish such lectures, papers, reports, pamphlets and books as may tend to promote a better appreciation and understanding of the early history of the United States.*

*2. It shall be within the purposes of said Corporation as means to that end to conduct research, to establish and maintain charitable, benevolent and public educational activities of a historical nature and to aid any historical agencies and institutions already established and any other means and agencies which from time to time shall seem expedient to its Trustees.*

—from the 1931 Articles of Incorporation under NYS  
Not-for-profit Corporation Law

One is struck today by these firm commitments to historic preservation in 1931, the development of both documentary and artifactual collections, and scholarly research and publication. The founders' commitments remain cornerstones for this museum seven decades later. The breadth of historical scope is also unusual (all facets of the “early history of the United States”)—well beyond what might have been self-evident attention to 18th-century military history. There is no

discussion of audience; amongst all this verbiage, no hints at all about whom the audience might be for such a program.

The venerable museum went through a major transformation following the death of the family patriarch and son of the museum founder in 1987. By 1989, a re-activated board had hired the museum's first professionally trained director. To develop a cohesive vision among the new board and its new director, an early, shared assignment was to revisit—apparently for the first time in living memory—the mission of the Association, last stated in the 1931 Articles of Incorporation.

By October 1989, the new board and its new director had fashioned a lengthy mission statement intended to establish a broad consensus of purpose for the re-born organization.

*The mission of the Fort Ticonderoga Association is the preservation and interpretation of Fort Ticonderoga, a National Historic Landmark. The resources of the Association are devoted to public education.*

*Collections, preservation, and education at Fort Ticonderoga increase public understanding of the significance of the changing historical relationships of conflict and concord among nations and peoples. The museum's historical focus ranges from paleolithic settlement on the Ticonderoga peninsula to Samuel de Champlain's arrival at Ticonderoga in 1609 to the construction of Fort Carillon in 1755 to its preservation after 1820.*

*For a broad international audience, the Association interprets the Fort's role as the key to the North American continent during seven decades between 1755 and 1825 when nations contested here for empire. The Association recognizes that understanding the relationship between people, the land and the water is central to understanding this site's significance historically and today.*

*To further the mission of the Association, it acquires, protects, and interprets historically associated sites (including the three outlying dependencies of Mount Hope, Mount Independence, and Mount Defiance) as*



well as related artifacts, artworks, books and manuscripts.

*The pioneering effort of the Pell family to save and restore the Fort has itself become a significant chapter in the history of American preservation. The Association, therefore, preserves as part of the Fort's history "The Pavilion," the Ticonderoga home of Stephen H.P. and Sarah G.T. Pell and their associated family papers.*

*For the cultural enrichment of people everywhere, the Association makes the internationally important collections in its care accessible through exhibitions and publications. It conducts and encourages scholarly historical and archeological research. It manages its lands as a leader in stewardship of the Lake Champlain basin and the Adirondack region.*

—the 1989 Mission Statement adopted by the Executive Committee of the Board

**We have found that revisiting mission leads to a shared—and therefore healthier—sense of organizational purpose. That, in turn, shapes our planning.**

This mission statement was even lengthier than the 1931 version (which was not referred to in the 1989 statement). The verbosity was necessary to create a broad new umbrella under which everyone could come together on common ground for purpose and operation. We sought, in this statement, to draw together themes important to all branches of the board (then almost entirely Pell family). The 1931 commitments to preservation, collection, and scholarship were once again embedded in the mission. But the document is laden with potential footnotes.

- With grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the founders as its co-authors, it is not surprising that the

family legacy was now heralded—and also explicitly constrained by potential concerns for accusations of “private inurement.” Now, for the first time in its 175-year history, The Pavilion (a lakeshore 1826 hotel purpose-built by the Pell family for the emerging heritage-tourism trade, and, during the 20th-century, the family’s summer home) became a preservation and interpretative commitment of the museum.

- The 1931 statement had been vague about its geographical and historical scope. With a politically charged regional audience in mind, the outlying dependencies at Mounts Defiance, Hope, and Independence were specifically embraced in the Mission. (Mount Independence was acquired in 1910; the other two dependencies in the mid-1970s.) The historical scope was “clarified” to embrace the full sweep from the antiquity of Native American occupation of the peninsula 10,000 years ago through the site’s preservation in 1820. (We were not yet alert to the continuing history of heritage tourism in the 19th- and 20th-centuries.)

- With emphatic input from one corner of the family and support from the new director, the 1989 mission statement embraced land stewardship (recognizing that FTA preserved ca. 2500 acres of historically and ecologically significant land in two states).

- Another element of the family joined the new director to encourage incorporation of a quasi-political statement that the museum was committed to interpretation of “a place of conflict and concord” among nations.

- Most importantly, the new Mission affirmed the museum’s commitment to public education, and claimed “a broad international audience.”

From this mission, in 1989 the museum developed its first Five-Year Plan for 1989–1993. More importantly, the board instituted a Long-Range Planning Committee as a standing committee of the Board of Trustees. That committee is charged with reporting at every quarterly meeting, summarizing progress and noting where corrections need to be made due to changing circumstances. At the same time during the 1987–1989

transition, the board also instituted an informal commitment to five-year terms for its presidents, and a tradition that a presumptive president chairs the long-range Planning Committee. Thus each president has played a leadership role in shaping the mission statement for his/her future term of office, and the five-year Plan for accomplishing that mission.

As the first Five-Year Plan was completed in 1993, the board developed a strategic plan leading to the museum's centennial in 2009, as well as a second Five-Year Plan for 1994–1998. The board and senior staff began that planning effort by revisiting the mission statement. There was a strong call for brevity, and for a less prosaic statement. The then-President sought “rallying poetry.”

*The Mission of the Fort Ticonderoga Association is to preserve, interpret, and celebrate one of the most significant North American places of destiny and beauty.*

*The Association engages in a dynamic interpretation of Fort Ticonderoga, the Ticonderoga peninsula, Mount Independence, Mount Defiance, Mount Hope and The Pavilion to inspire Americans, Canadians, and an international audience with an understanding of 18th- and 19th-century culture and history.*

*The Association uses its unique combination of historic structures and landscapes, collections and programs as a cultural and educational resource for people of all ages and backgrounds.*

—the 1994 Mission Statement, adopted 4 March 1994

The call to protect this “landscape of destiny and beauty” still mobilizes our constituency! We repeatedly emphasized our concern for education, and spoke about the breadth of audience we sought. But we also felt compelled to continue and itemize nine ways in which we proposed to accomplish the mission: preservation of structures and sites; care of collections; education through exhibits, publications, and other services; and research (both documentary and archeological). In that nine-point litany, we stretched in some unexpected directions as well:

- For readers who might assume that Fort Ticonderoga was “simply” an historic site, we noted the commitment to maintain a research library. (The Thompson-Pell Research Center had been dedicated two years earlier.)

- We claimed a place as a leader in land stewardship in the Champlain Valley.

- We asserted a commitment to work in collaboration with sister institutions in the region in all fields of common interest.

- Perhaps most surprising, we announced our interest in the five ships of the US Navy named for Fort Ticonderoga.

In 1999, a new board president, a larger board, and a growing senior staff launched the third five-year planning cycle, based on yet another revision of the mission statement.

*The Mission of the Fort Ticonderoga Association is to preserve and interpret a world-class historic site and museum by offering*

- *to our visitors: the highest level of educational experience;*
- *to the scholarly community: premier collections and research facilities; and*
- *to the world: the finest example of a privately managed historic trust.*

—the 1999 Mission Statement,  
adopted 23 October 1999

The new president insisted upon attention to excellence and to audience. We carried forward the nine-point litany declaring the means by which we accomplish this mission without change from the previous iteration. But we supplemented the stripped-down brevity of the 1999 mission statement with various specific commitments, including:

- preservation of the Carillon Battlefield;
- investment in staff;
- building mutually supportive community ties; and
- following sound financial practices.

From this mission, in 1998, staff developed—and the board approved—a third Five-Year Plan for 1999–2003.




That planning framework is now concluding. Great progress has again been made, especially in the development of educational programs.

Board and staff are currently developing a fourth Five-Year Plan for 2004–2009, which will bring the museum to its centennial and a series of major historical commemorations that year. This time, the mission statement emerges largely from staff discussions. As director, I am seeking a five-year plan, which stretches us interpretively and educationally. (Earlier plans had focused tightly on addressing deferred maintenance of the physical plant.) To lead the redrafting effort, I turned to the newest members of the senior staff, who assembled the “bones” which were fleshed out by their colleagues. Our redrafted mission aspires to explain what we teach, and how, while struggling to remain brief enough to be memorable.

*The Fort Ticonderoga Association engages, educates, and entertains visitors by sharing the authentic stories of diverse cultures that met at the Ticonderoga peninsula in war and in peace. We accomplish this through accurate historical interpretation, high standards of management of our world-class collections for exhibition and scholarly research, innovative educational offerings, sustainable horticulture and land stewardship, sound fiscal management and operational excellence.*

—Mission Statement under  
Board consideration in October 2003

“Authentic stories,” stories of everyday people and extraordinary events, drive our educational mission today. We attend to both war and peace. Our twin commitments to history and landscape are underscored. And we remind ourselves (and others) that sound management assures our capability for accomplishing the balance of our mission.

If approved by the board at its November 2003 meeting, this latest revision of the mission will drive the next five-year Plan leading to the museum’s Centennial in 2009. The Plan will detail how the museum will “engage, educate, and entertain” through “authentic stories.” Stories vividly and accurately told will be at the core of all we do. 

# MISSION HISTORY FOCUS PRESERVATION RE CHANGE INTERPRETATION RELEVANCE SCOPE PURPOSE ON PROFILES ASSOCIATION DIALOGUE VISION IN

## REFOCUSING INTERPRETIVE MISSION: A CASE STUDY

Liselle LaFrance, Director  
Historic Cherry Hill, Albany, NY



### Backdrop to Change

**H**istoric Cherry Hill is a site that is blessed with documentation—20,000 objects, 30,000 manuscripts, 7,500 textiles, 5,000 books and 3,000 photographs—all accumulated by five generations of the Albany family that resided in the Georgian-style farmhouse from 1787 through 1963.

In the mid-1980s, recognizing that many family associates had died in recent years, the museum embarked on a multi-year effort focusing on the 20th-century. Efforts included researching the thousands of manuscripts from this period, conducting dozens of oral history interviews with Cherry Hill family relatives and friends, and completing historic landscape and furnishing studies.

In 1987, the museum presented a symposium on the Colonial Revival, and much of the site's 20th-century research was featured in a paper presented by then-Curator Jacqueline Calder, entitled "Cherry Hill: The Evolution of a Colonial Revival Home, 1882–1955" (this and other presentations from that symposium were later published in *Creating a Dignified Past: Museums and the Colonial Revival*, edited by Geoffrey L. Rossano).

It is nearly impossible to pinpoint a moment when it was determined that Historic Cherry Hill needed to reassess its mission, but understanding—through the 20th-century initiative—that Cherry Hill was an archetypal Colonial Revival site, certainly provided the

opportunity and motivation to reconsider the mission as it had been originally conceived by the Cherry Hill family.

In her book, *Domesticating History*, historian Patricia West writes:

*"Changes in the house museum movement in the early twentieth century reflected other large cultural patterns, most notably the brandishing of the Anglo-American version of history in reaction to the 'new immigration' and increasing heterogeneity. House museum founders used their institutions to bolster the image of the 'home' and of elite forefathers as metaphors for particular interpretations of the American political and cultural tradition."*<sup>1</sup>

### Institutional Roots Pose a Challenge

Understanding the Cherry Hill family in terms of two larger, intertwined movements—the Colonial Revival and the historic house museum genre—spurred us to look a little more critically at the founding vision.

When a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)-funded consultant noted that Cherry Hill's "furnishings and architecture are no longer 'grand' enough or its family famous enough to be a cultural icon and to draw visitors for those reasons," he left us pondering the museum's inherited mission. The



consultant, interpretive specialist Peter O'Connell, was part of an eight-member team asked to assess Historic Cherry Hill's interpretive efforts. Ultimately, the two-year self-study led to a new tour, "The Rankins of Cherry Hill: Struggling with the Loss of Their World," and just as importantly, a new mission statement.

Like many historic sites, Historic Cherry Hill's roots were laden with political motivation, conscious or not.

It is only due to its site-specific focus that this statement does not sound entirely like that of most local and regional historical societies. As the museum's staff continued to work with consultants to develop the new interpretation, we began to recognize our challenge—we needed to find a way to marry Emily Rankin's vision for her family home with the interests and needs of diverse contemporary audiences, in an engaging, relevant way.

## **We know that our community and our audience will change. We also know that with our vast resources, there is still more to learn about the Cherry Hill family and its motivations. Missions are not set in stone.**

In fact, the founding of the museum is the end of the story we tell through the tour. Emily Rankin was the last surviving member of the five-generation Van Rensselaer family that lived in the house until 1963. When the museum opened the year after Emily's death, its Statement of Purpose was drawn directly from her will:

*The acquisition, restoration, care and preservation of the property known as Cherry Hill and its contents as an object of historical, educational, architectural and artistic worth for the benefit of the people of the State of New York. To do so, Historic Cherry Hill will focus its plans in the following manner:*

*A. Preserve, maintain and develop structures, site and collections of Historic Cherry Hill;*

*B. Interpret the collection, structures and site to the public on a regular, ongoing basis;*

*C. Conduct research to further the understanding of the Van Rensselaer/Elmendorf/Rankin families and their roles in their communities;*

*D. Promote programs of historical and educational interest to the public.*

### **Formulating a Remedy**

If there was one major distinction between the "old tour" and the new, I would say that the new tour presents a contextualized and, therefore, more balanced approach to history, while the former came dangerously close to supporting the family's celebratory, nostalgic view of their own past.

As the tour was revised, so too was our perspective on Emily Rankin's legacy. The organizing theme of past interpretive efforts was "Change and Continuity over Five Generations of Family Living." The story now told focuses on Emily's mother, Catherine, and the organizing theme is best articulated in the orientation exhibit's master label:

*Cherry Hill was home to Catherine Putman Rankin and her family from 1884 through 1963. Within its walls, Catherine created a refined way of life that glorified her Van Rensselaer family heritage. During her lifetime, she and other members of America's elite faced profound social, economic and political changes that threatened their way of life and position in society. Catherine and many others chose to look to the past as a means of coping with these changes.*

Looking at Cherry Hill and the family from this perspective made thinking about our audiences far easier. From there, the mission was re-framed:

*Through its preservation, research and interpretive initiatives, Historic Cherry Hill explores one Albany family's search for order and stability in response to personal and social change, encouraging the public to establish an emotional connection and critical distance in order to gain perspective on their own history and lives.*



## Measuring Success

How do we know whether we are successfully meeting our new mission? Input from focus groups helped develop the tour and orientation exhibit. Learning and emotional objectives, drawing heavily on the mission, were articulated for the tour, and an understanding of these is integral to the volunteer interpreter training program.

A new evaluation was also developed, which measures the tour's effectiveness in terms of the learning and emotional objectives. Visitors are asked to take evaluation forms home with them, and to wait a few days before filling them out (the promise of a small gift—a stress ball bearing the phrase “Feeling the Squeeze: The Rankins of Cherry Hill”—has made the rate of return extremely high). They are asked if any elements of the tour resonate in their own lives, and what emotions they felt as the story unfolded—surprise, sympathy, anger, amusement, disappointment, etc. A more immediate opportunity to reflect is also provided in the house; a “Visitors Respond” board solicits feedback by posing broad questions about the tour's themes.

The following comments gathered from these evaluations suggest that the museum indeed lives up to its mission:

- What was the most important message or theme of the tour?

*“I was interested in how the family dealt with change by clinging to the past.”*

*“How a prominent, ‘old’ family dealt with/responded to change of many types.”*

*“That the daughter looked to the past to ease the difficult changes taking place in her life.”*

- Was there any particular idea or theme, which really caught your attention?

*“Some things never change. Here in the U.S. we feel immigrants are beneath us because of their race or culture.”*

*“The almost obsessive clutching for stability in a changing world—like ‘Gone with the Wind!’.”*

*“Whatever horror was going on in the world, this home was a haven and comfort to this family.”*

- Was there anything mentioned in the tour that was relevant to your own life experience?

*“I feel most people can identify with some of the circumstances of life's persistent change.”*

*“I found her spirit very inspirational. It's so easy to give up and I hope to remember her when I'm feeling down.”*

## Mission of the Future

Now that we've revisited and revised our mission, are we “done” with that? Not if we want to remain relevant. We know that our community and our audience will change. We also know that with our vast resources, there is still more to learn about the Cherry Hill family and its motivations. Missions are not set in stone. At Historic Cherry Hill, we will treat the original Statement of Purpose as a historical document, continue to respect the founders' vision for their home, and reexamine our articulation of that vision regularly.

We know that our community and our audience will change. We also know that with our vast resources, there is still more to learn about the Cherry Hill family and its motivations. Missions are not set in stone.

## A Checklist for Change

- Know your site and its strengths: Museums are organic. As a result, there is always more to know. New knowledge gained from your collections or your community may well lead you down the road to a new mission. Remember to look externally as well as internally.

- Question your roots: On the surface, it might have seemed logical to leave Historic Cherry Hill's founding mission intact—it had been inherited along with the property and collections. But the Cherry Hill family had particular motivations in perpetuating their own family history, and they could not have understood the diversity and complexity of today's audiences.





- Provide the needed resources: If an organization is intent on making a real change in mission, (or even philosophy), adequate time, money and other resources will be required to “make it stick.” The reshaping of Cherry Hill’s mission occurred over several years, with the help of grants from NEH and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). The reinterpretation and accompanying work on mission was made an institutional priority.

- Focus on audience: Whom are you trying to serve? Audiences must be given an active voice in the mission. Think of it as an equation with two equal parts. If it is one-sided, it will be out of balance.

- Test and evaluate: A mission may sound really snazzy, but is it on target? Does it describe your institution, its services, and its audiences as they exist today?

- Don’t stand still: Reexamine your mission regularly. 🌱

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 161.