

## **“If These Walls Could Talk...What Story Should They Tell?”**

### *Volunteer Management Case Study*



**About 1925**



**Today**

#### **Background:**

A local historical society, a private nonprofit organization, owns a historic house museum. The house was built in 1796 by one of the most imminent business men (Israel Crane), whose name appears on many buildings, parks, roads etc. He was instrumental in building the main transportation route and the overall layout of the town because of the new road. He built the home beside his general store on the main road in the town just after he was married. The couple had seven children. However, when his wife died, Israel turned over the house and business to his eldest son, James, moving to a nearby city to pursue other business opportunities. James married, raised six children in the house and ran the general store. Around 1840, James made substantial changes/updates to the home including adding a large balcony and a laundry room. He made the third level into another floor with a molding on top and iron grilles at the windows. In the hallway, a curved staircase with columns was added, and the moldings were changed. It has two parlors, two staircases, one dining room, two kitchens, and five bedrooms are located on the second floor. In 1870, black marble mantels were added to the fireplaces in the three main rooms. James lived in the home until his death (1809-1898). James' wife, Phebe, continued to live in the house until she died in 1902. The home was then used for other purposes until 1965 when it was moved to its present location across town and the local historical society was formed.

#### **The Problem:**

When the house was moved in 1965, the town and the country was busy preparing for the nation's bicentennial in 1976. The founders wanted to display the country's earliest beginnings by preserving an important part of their town's past and recreate what was missing. The historical society decided to strip the house of some of its 1840 architectural details so that it would look more like the original house when it was built in 1796 but they couldn't do this

completely. They also decided to create an old kitchen attached at the side of the house again harkening back to its earliest beginnings with an open-hearth fireplace used for cooking. Over the years, the volunteer interpretive guides, and later the small staff, interpreted the home from the Colonial-era perspective. The Colonial era resonates with the volunteers and visitors despite the fact that the house is clearly post-Colonial (1796 at its earliest and 1840 at the latest). The Executive Director applied for and received two grants that made this problem even prominent to the staff and Board of Directors. The first was a grant to document the original elements of the house to determine future needs for restoration and preservation. It was discovered during that process that few parts of the house are original to 1796, some date to 1840 and many date to the 1965 move and stabilization of the house. The second grant was to then use this information and design a new interpretive plan that would be truer to the house's evolution and assets. The Board also undertook a mission evaluation which resulted in a new mission statement which is:

The mission of MHS is to cultivate a strong sense of community by engaging residents and visitors through programs, exhibits, and the conservation and interpretation of the Society's historic sites and collections; and by promoting the preservation and adaptive reuse of Montclair's buildings, structures and areas of historic significance (adopted February 2007).

As a result of these initiatives, changes are needed to the interpretive plan and guide training for both current volunteers and for recruitment of volunteers. This is challenging because some of the interpreters were involved in the moving of the house in 1965 and enjoy talking broadly about the Colonial era, including dressing up in Colonial-era clothing, demonstrating Colonial crafts and cooking. However, they do not do first-person interpretation ("I am.....who live in the house").

### **Case Questions:**

1. What are the main volunteer management issues associated with this case?
2. What are some ways the Executive Director could work on these issues?
3. Are there any other possible unintended consequences by making these changes?

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November 29, 2010

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