

significant problem, at least for this engineering-challenged reviewer, is that the book seems to assume a minimum knowledge of bridge construction. Consequently, such arcane terms as stringers, trusses, pony trusses, chords, "bending moment stresses," H-beams, and I-beams are tossed at the reader without definition. For the layperson, either a glossary or drawings of the various bridge types with their parts identified would have saved time and frustration.

*Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, by Patricia West. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1999. xiii, 241 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

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Patricia West's book places house museums in a broad social context, presenting house museums not as collections of objects or as a litany of daily lives, but, rather, showing how these entities came to be. West uses four house museums—Mount Vernon, Monticello, Orchard House (home of Louisa May Alcott), and the Booker T. Washington National Monument—as case studies to review the cultural, political, and societal influences on their formation. Social diversity and gender are key elements in the interpretation of each museum. None of these organizations is neutral or politically aloof; each is affected by external issues prevalent at the particular place and time it was founded and developed. Perhaps a bit too detailed for the casual reader, the book focuses on key but seldom considered issues that still affect American house museums.

The case study approach makes the issue manageable. Four mini-case studies represent two "stars" of the house museum world and two lesser-known but equally interesting sites. Shrines to founding fathers, the home of a female author, and the reconstructed birthplace of an African American scientist allow the author to consider the sites in terms of race, class, and gender. Since each house museum came to be during a different period in our nation's history, West cites issues such as immigration patterns, governmental involvement, and the role of professionals in the house museum movement to explain the variety of influences as these entities developed. West's selection of case studies provides a nice variety over time. The interpretive focus tends to be on famous inhabitants, but even places primarily associated with such people have recently begun to emphasize a broader interpretation, incorporating the workers in these houses as well as their owners.

West does a good job of articulating the changing roles of house museums. Early on, Sanitary Commission fairs exhibited domestic objects in the setting of period rooms to raise funds for social purposes. Interest in such objects and their settings gave rise to period rooms in larger museums and then to the house museum itself. At one time, house museums rivaled department stores as the source of "decorating ideas."

The changes in the emphasis and mission of house museums parallel the changes in women's roles in society. Women of a certain class started the historic house movement devoted to perpetuating traditional values and causes, such as the civic education of immigrants and the deification of founding fathers. In the late nineteenth century, when professionalization of many fields occurred, museum professionals—primarily college-educated men—assumed a greater role in the field, relegating women to volunteer or support roles. Societal factors that limited women's access to advanced education prohibited women from continuing their leadership role in the house museum world.

West shows how created or reconstructed "historic sites" took advantage of the public's interest without regard to authenticity. Betsy Ross's house in Philadelphia has always been a popular tourist site even though there is no evidence that it has anything to do with the American flag. What was promoted as Booker T. Washington's birthplace was a not only a creation, but its inaccuracies presented slave life as a benign, caring system. Orchard House was "a memorial to a nostalgic version of a traditional American house" (68), one that unfortunately never existed. Orchard House was interpreted more as a suggested stage set for *Little Women* than as the home of a suffragist.

Overall, West does an admirable job of addressing the history of house museums, demonstrating convincingly that the institutions that exist to preserve and operate historic sites have histories as fascinating as the sites themselves. Occasionally, her efforts to provide context are a bit unwieldy, but that is an understandable result of her focus.

West's approach to the history of house museums is relevant to each such entity today. Although scholars have devoted considerable attention to the restoration and preservation of individual sites and to their programmatic and interpretive efforts, the political climate in which they began and in which they continue to exist provides yet another interesting way to study multiple themes in American history.

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