

BEYOND THE POWELS: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AS PRIMARY
SOLUTIONS FOR THE POWEL HOUSE

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

by
Lyell Funk
May 2015

Thesis Approvals:

Seth C. Bruggeman, Ph.D., Advisor, Temple University, History Department

Hilary Iris Lowe, Ph.D., Temple University, History Department

Jonathan Burton, Executive Director, The Philadelphia Society for the
Preservation of Landmarks



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

ABSTRACT

Philadelphia is a city that constantly gazes back toward its eighteenth-century past. Many of its historic sites rely on legends from the era of the American founding fathers in order to attract visitors. The Powel House, an historic house museum that was once the home of Philadelphia's last colonial and first post-revolutionary mayor Samuel Powel, fits into this category. Yet for The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, the consortium that manages the Powel House, there is a pressing need for an expanded audience and increased funding, and the story of the Patriot Mayor does not provide enough fuel to achieve these goals. This essay examines some of the Powel House's lesser-known narratives. It suggests that for historic house museums such as the Powel House that are bound to constricted historical eras, an exploration of the house's entire history is a route toward uncovering new strategies for audience engagement. The essay isolates three specific narratives from the early twentieth century, and contemplates how each individual story can be leveraged for Landmarks' broader goals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the completion of this essay, I must acknowledge the help from Seth Bruggeman, my advisor here at Temple University, who has guided me along my journey to find my niche in public history and understand this captivating field. I thank Jonathan Burton, the Executive Director at Landmarks, for accepting me into the fold of his forward-thinking organization and allowing me to see first-hand how a nonprofit history museum functions behind-the-scenes. I also thank the rest of the Landmarks team, including Jennifer Davidson, Mickey Herr, and Del Conner. I thank my public history professors, Hilary Iris Lowe, Margery Sly, and Deborah Boyer, my fellow public history students at Temple, in addition to my additional professors and fellow graduate students. Thanks to family and friends as well.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE POWEL HOUSE NARRATIVE	
The Powels	5
Wolf Klebansky	8
Landmarks	12
3. PAST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POWEL HOUSE	
Before Tatum	16
George B. Tatum	20
The Guide's Manuals	21
4. THREE FRESH NARRATIVES: SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW	
INTERPRETIVE DIRECTIONS	
Alternative Narratives	24
Wolf Klebansky	26
Edith Standen	30
Frances Wister	34
5. CONCLUSION	
Analysis and Assessment	40

BIBLIOGRAPHY 45

APPENDIX

Narrative Research Method 47

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For visitors to Philadelphia that seek to experience the history of the city, Society Hill is an appealing destination. After a short walk southeast of Independence Hall, many of these people will pass a house and garden on South 3rd Street. Some will take a minute to read the placard situated on the sidewalk, and over the course of an afternoon, perhaps a dozen visitors will make their way inside the house. Others will make a direct trip to the house, already familiar with what it has to offer. Either way, as has been the case for decades, the eighteenth-century narrative of the Powel House, the story of the “Patriot Mayor,” Samuel Powel, and his hospitable wife, Elizabeth, is the selling card for the historic house at 244 South 3rd Street that now operates as a museum.

There is something curious about this phenomenon, something that is not unique to the Powel House within the greater context of Philadelphia. Samuel Powel died in 1793, and Elizabeth Powel sold the house in 1798. Yet walk through the house in 2015, the 250th anniversary of the building, and one will find that the story of what occurred inside the house after 1798 is nearly untraceable. The Powel House is an historic house museum bound to its foundational narrative, and one among several historic sites in Philadelphia that struggles to expand upon the city’s most overwhelming historical motif.

This paper is designed as an exploration of historical interpretation at the Powel House. Intensive focus is given to the history of the Powel House and its nearby properties in the timespan from 1904 through the mid-1930s. This was a period during which the house shifted ownership from the estate of Jewish businessman Wolf

Klebansky to the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks (“Landmarks,” for short). Landmarks currently manages four historic houses, and among them is the Powel residence.¹ I examine the early twentieth-century history of the Powel House and break it down into three related narratives, each of which has received little to no attention in past and current interpretations of the house.

My chief argument is that for historic house museums that sell themselves for their links to constricted spans of time, the identification and use of under-utilized historical narratives from alternative periods of time fosters an expansion of audience. As I further consider, the implementation of under-utilized narratives does not merely enhance the quality of history that is presented inside the historic house museum. Such interpretive expansion can also lead to practical benefits for the organization that runs the museum, such as a broadened opportunity to forge new relationships with other institutions. I also broadly consider how my argument relates to historic sites within Philadelphia that attach themselves to eighteenth-century narratives.

A popular inquiry among public historians in recent years has been the consideration of the origins of historic house museums, and how these origins inform the ensuing trajectories at such sites. Preservationist Patricia West observes that the founders of several American house museums possessed motivations that were linked to the cultural politics of their respective generations.² Although West does not discuss how this relates to the necessities of modern interpretive planning, she does note that an awareness of a house museum’s origins is useful for the presentation of a more complete and honest

¹ Aside from the Powel House, Landmarks also manages the Physick House in Society Hill, Grumblethorpe in Germantown, and Waynesborough in Paoli.

² Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), Kindle Edition, 2%.

historical interpretation.³ Along this line, some public historians have undertaken analyses of house museum origins with regard to material culture and the original restoration periods at such houses.⁴

For organizations that run historic sites in Philadelphia, careful consideration of institutional origins is a potential avenue toward improved historical interpretation. Particularly for Philadelphia's historic sites, though, time serves as a common intractable obstacle. As Historian Charlene Mires observes in her study of Independence Hall, the building, in both its history and its present state, is best understood if the entirety of its existence is fully considered.⁵ Mires contends that while grand topics such as the American founding documents are significant within the narrative of Independence Hall, the key to uncovering the building's greater significance lies in recognizing how Americans have remembered the building over its lifetime. Mires is able to clarify the rich social and cultural history of Independence Hall when she analyzes the building beyond the constricted temporal and spatial boundaries of the eighteenth century. The Powel House developed into a notable landmark concurrently with Independence Hall. Landmarks is in a suitable position to replicate Mires' interpretive approach with regard to the Powel House.

This paper is an exercise in analyzing historical narratives relevant to the Powel House that are outside the tight boundaries of the story of the Powels. I commence with a

³ Ibid., 66%.

⁴ For house museum studies that use material culture as a lens, see Hilary Iris LoHeidi Aronson Kolk, "The Many-Layered Cultural Lives of Things: Experiments in Multidisciplinary Object Study at a Local House Museum in St. Louis," *Winterthur Portfolio* 47, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2013): 161-196; Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, "Reality as Illusion, the Historic Houses that Become Museums," *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (2001): 10-15.

⁵ Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), viii.

general narrative of the Powel House that gives added weight to the house's early twentieth-century history. Next, I survey some of the ways in which people since the turn of the twentieth century have interpreted the Powel House's history. In the following section, I isolate three narratives that each revolves around an individual figure associated with the Powel House during the early twentieth-century. Wolf Klebansky, Edith A. Standen, and Frances Anne Wister are the subjects that I analyze in this section, and I contemplate practical suggestions on how Landmarks can utilize each narrative to expand upon its current interpretation and use of the Powel House. Finally, I conclude with commentary on the current state of Landmarks and the difficulty of balancing the limitations of the historic house museum space with the desire to move the house museum in bold new directions.

CHAPTER 2

THE POWEL HOUSE NARRATIVE

The Powels

Interpreters of the significant historical events and people associated with the Powel House tend to focus almost exclusively on the house's familiar eighteenth-century residents and visitors. Scholars, along with members of the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, have constructed detailed life stories for Samuel Powel and Elizabeth Powel. Their collective work has set a consistent and rather unquestioned narrative of how this prominent upper class couple made use of the house in ways that made the property more than just another home in Philadelphia.

The house's builder, a Scottish immigrant named Charles Stedman, likely could not have foreseen the scores of famed Americans who would enter the house in the decades following its construction. Stedman constructed his new house on the western block of South 3rd Street, and completed it by 1765 with the help of architect Robert Smith. Due to poor financial circumstances, Stedman ultimately sold the house to Samuel Powel III on August 2, 1769.⁶

Powel, born in 1738, descended from a wealthy Philadelphia family, was well educated, and transformed himself into a worldly aristocrat by the time he decided to purchase his own house. He had followed up his graduation from the College of Philadelphia in 1759 with a lengthy Grand Tour of Europe, a long journey he shared with a group of friends. While in Europe, Powel's tastes for art and architecture matured, and

⁶ George B. Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian: The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of Its Eighteenth-Century Neighbors* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1976), 5-6, 48.

he spent company with luminaries such as Pope Clement and Voltaire. Powel arrived back in Philadelphia in 1767, and bought Stedman's 3rd Street property two years later as a home for himself and his soon-to-be wife Elizabeth Willing, who also descended from a prominent Philadelphia family.⁷

Samuel Powel made a foray into politics that paid off when Philadelphia elected him as mayor on October 3rd, 1775. He was the final mayor under the Charter of the City of Philadelphia, William Penn's ratified document dating back to 1701.⁸ Powel was eventually elected as the city's mayor again on April 11th, 1789. He was thus the final colonial mayor of Philadelphia and the city's first post-Revolutionary mayor.⁹ This political success earned Powel a moniker among historians and other interpreters as the "patriot mayor."¹⁰ Although Powel only served as mayor for a cumulatively short amount of time, he lived the life of a noble statesman in the span of years between his two terms. It was during these years that many famed American political icons visited the house and formed connections with the Powels.

The couple was especially noted for their refined hospitality, a characteristic for which the house on 3rd Street played a central role. The Powels were particularly close friends with George and Martha Washington, but other well-known names also enjoyed warm hospitality at the house. George Washington once famously danced with Benjamin

⁷ Ibid., 9-14.

⁸ Charles B. McMichael, comp., *The Municipal Law of Philadelphia: A Digest of the Charters, Acts of Assembly, Ordinances, and Judicial Decisions* (Philadelphia: J.M. Power Wallace, 1887), 7-8.

⁹ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

Franklin's daughter at a celebration for Franklin's birthday at the house.¹¹ John Adams also wrote of a "sinfull Feast" that he had enjoyed at the house in 1774.¹² Stories about such festive gatherings encapsulate the legends around which public interest has developed about the Powel House. Adding to the house's mystique, the Powels gave close attention to their house's architectural and material characteristics. The house's alignment with ideal Georgian style has been a major factor for the long-sustained public interest in the building.¹³

The end of the Powels' residency in the house was rather anticlimactic, a time during which the gleaming aura of the building drastically faded. Samuel Powel fell victim to the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, which left Elizabeth Powel a widow at fifty years old. The couple had only had two sons during their marriage, both of whom died early in their lives. Elizabeth Powel thus decided to take in her nephew, John Powel Hare, as her heir. She sold the house at 244 South 3rd Street in 1798, living out the majority of her elder years as a widow elsewhere until her death in 1830. Even in the years between her husband's death and her sale of the house, Elizabeth Powel spent less of her daily time in the building than before.¹⁴ It is likely for this reason that details of the house's history become far less detailed after 1793.

Although sparsely chronicled, the story of the house continues far beyond the life of the Powels. Several lawyers owned the property during the nineteenth century,

¹¹ Ibid., 87.

¹² Ibid., 78.

¹³ For another expansive work on Georgian architecture that cites the Powel House, see: Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Cortlandt van Dyke Hubbard, *American Georgian Architecture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1952).

¹⁴ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, 24-25.

including William Rawle, Charles Wilkes, and L. Theodore Salaignac. A merchant named Isaiah Hacker also owned the house in the middle of the century.¹⁵

No person has yet produced even a moderately detailed nineteenth-century account of the Powel House. Unfortunately, the scarcity of archival materials related to the nineteenth-century owners is currently a roadblock toward constructing an interpretation of the house during the period from 1798 through 1904. I am hopeful that future researchers will be inclined to take on challenges such as an account of the Powel House during Rawle's ownership of the building, or an account of the house during the American Civil War. Alternatively, there is enough historical evidence currently available to build a strong narrative for the house that accounts for its early twentieth-century history.

Wolf Klebansky

This narrative begins with Wolf Klebansky, who is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing and misunderstood figures in the history of the Powel House. Born into a Jewish family in Nemaščiai, Russia (now within the borders of Lithuania), Klebansky immigrated to the United States in 1884.¹⁶ His work involved the importation “Russian and Siberian Horse Hair and Bristles,” and he found success conducting business in his adopted city of Philadelphia.¹⁷ On December 9, 1904, Klebansky purchased the Powel House, which the deceased lawyer L. Theodore Salaignac had previously owned.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Harry D. Boonin, *The Life and Times of Congregation Keshet Israel* (Philadelphia: Harry D. Boonin, 2007), 94.

¹⁷ *Brooms, Brushes, & Handles* (Milwaukee: Dec. 1904), 33.

¹⁸ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, 25.

Klebansky resided in the building next-door, 246 South 3rd Street, a property he had purchased five years earlier.¹⁹

Klebansky was a busy man. Not only was his business highly profitable, but he led an active life in Philadelphia's Jewish Quarter, making him a well known figure in the local community. He was a founding member of Keshet Israel, a synagogue at 412 Lombard Street.²⁰ When the synagogue's president died unexpectedly in 1906, Klebansky became the institution's leader.²¹ Klebansky and his wife Chaya Dobra formed a charitable couple that gave aid to help the impoverished children of immigrants.²² It appears that the couple may have been childless themselves. Klebansky was also the treasurer of the Central Relief Committee of Philadelphia during World War I, which served to protect Jewish interests.²³ His relative, Rabbi Samuel Shapiro, lived next-door to the Powel House at 242 South 3rd Street.²⁴ At least within the Jewish community in Philadelphia, Klebansky was a well-respected figure.

His reputation as gathered from historical accounts of the Powel House is not as favorable. This is not to say that Klebansky is deserving of criticism with regard to his use of the Powel House. His role in the grand narrative of the house itself has not been depicted thoroughly or with due respect to his own interests or actions. Klebansky considered demolishing the Powel House in 1907, yet this was primarily an economic

¹⁹ Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia: A History and Guide, 1881-1930* (Philadelphia: Jewish Walking Tours of Philadelphia, 1999) 115.

²⁰ "Wolf Klebansky" *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), Jun. 10, 1932.

²¹ Boonin, *Keshet Israel*, 94.

²² Boonin, *Jewish Quarter*, 115.

²³ "Distinguished Jews of America: Jews Who Made Their Mark in Commerce, Profession, Philanthropy, Science, Politics, etc.," *Jewish Exponent* (Philadelphia, PA), September 28, 1917.

²⁴ Boonin, *Keshet Israel*, 94.

consideration. He claimed that the house was causing him to lose money; for exactly what reason it is not clear, but his intentions were not completely reckless. When the Philadelphia branch of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America, a patriotic female organization, informed Klebansky of the house's history, he decided against his demolition plan. In his own words, Klebansky "did not want to seem a vandal." In 1909, he attempted to go ahead with renovations of the house for business purposes, but again met the admonishment of the Society of Colonial Dames. Klebansky was sensitive to the people who cared about the house, although his repeated attempts to alter the building imply that he had little personal admiration for its history.²⁵ As an immigrant, Klebansky would have possessed a vastly different perspective on the history of his adopted country than the Colonial Dames.

Some of the early attempts to preserve the Powel House coincided with Klebansky's efforts to finally make money off the building. Klebansky sold the interior of the second floor back room to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1917, which was to be used for the museum's American Wing.²⁶ He sold off additional architectural elements on the second floor to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1925. This delicate exchange took place under the supervision of the museum's director, Fiske Kimball, who worked with a team of architects and a curator to purchase pieces such as plaster ceiling ornaments and a door from the house. Kimball used these architectural pieces to create a reconstruction of the second floor parlor in his museum.²⁷

²⁵ Boonin, *Jewish Quarter*, 114-115.

²⁶ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, 27-28.

²⁷ Kimball seemed to be eager in his approach to acquiring pieces from the Powel House. See Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, "Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769-70," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2012), E12.

The final chapter of Klebansky's ownership of the house is also controversial within accounts of the building's history. Such accounts claim that Klebansky attempts to demolish the house in 1930 to make way for an open-air garage. In reality, Klebansky was not in good health at this point of his life. It was, in fact, his nephew, Arthur A. Reichmann, who orchestrated the sale of the house.²⁸ In a 1955 letter, Reichmann describes his uncle as "invalided" and "incapacitated." Klebansky had fallen behind on paying the building's taxes, and when his health declined, Reichmann was forced to step in and take helm of the business. Reichmann looked to salvage the business from its unfortunate economic condition, as he was under considerable financial pressure from Klebansky's economic mistakes and the Great Depression. Although Reichmann's idea for allaying the situation was to sell off the properties to make way for the garage, he notified the press that people would be allowed to visit the property before the potential demolition. Thus, the Klebansky estate was under incredibly tight circumstances in 1930, yet Reichmann's outreach to the press helped to save the house rather than allow it to crumble to the ground. Klebansky died in 1932, although by this point, the Powel House

²⁸ George B. Tatum claims that it was Wolf Klebansky who proposed to sell off the property on South 3rd Street to a party that would build an open-air garage on the premises. Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley and Harry D. Boonin also claim that it was Klebansky that negotiated this deal. Tatum's account contradicts Boonin's, as Tatum claims Klebansky began negotiations in 1931, while Boonin claims that he had begun negotiations in 1930. See: Tatum, 28; Kirtley, E21-E22; Boonin 1999, 15.

was no longer under his ownership.²⁹

Landmarks

With the fate of the Powel House unclear, a meeting of the Society of Colonial Dames on February 7, 1931 spurred the formation of an organization for the purpose of finally saving the house.³⁰ Frances Anne Wister was chosen to be the president of this organization, which was established as the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks.³¹ Wister was born in 1874, and spent her adult life as a supporter of local culture, history, and parks in Philadelphia. She was a founder of the Women's Committee for the Philadelphia Orchestra and a president of this committee for forty-four years.³² She was also a founding member of the Regional Planning Federation of the Philadelphia Tri-State District, in addition to a long list of organizations with which she worked.³³ In 1930, Wister directed a survey that collected information on a number of Philadelphia's endangered historical buildings. The Powel House was one of these buildings, and Wister's membership in the Society of Colonial Dames along with her leadership experience made her an ideal candidate to lead the effort to preserve and restore the Powel House.³⁴

²⁹ Reichmann's correspondence with Landmarks in 1955 wholly contradicts the claims that Klebansky had agency in selling the property. In the letter he discusses how the idea to sell the house was his own idea. Reichmann does not confirm whether or not this idea was put into action in 1930 or 1931, so the dating of this is somewhat unclear. See: Arthur A. Reichmann to Symington P. Landreth, October 17, 1955.

³⁰ Frances Wister to Sir, July 20, 1931.

³¹ "Frances Wister Dies at 81; Civic Leader Honored Often," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, March 19, 1956.

³² "Miss Wister Dies, Civic Leader, 81," *Inquirer* (Philadelphia: Mar. 19, 1956).

³³ "Frances Wister Dies at 81."

³⁴ *Ibid.*

The Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of Landmarks held a meeting on May 20th, 1931, during which the committee approved the purchase of the Powel House at 244 South 3rd Street and Klebansky's former headquarters at 246 South 3rd Street. The total cost of this purchase was thirty thousand dollars.³⁵ In July 1931, Wister explained how the formation of Landmarks and the purchase of the house were related: "because the Mansion is in a section rich in historic and architectural treasures, which cannot be surpassed anywhere, a Society was started for the Preservation of Landmarks with the purchase of the Powel Mansion as its first enterprise."³⁶

As can be deduced from Wister's words, Landmarks purchased the house while leaving open the possibility of pursuing similar projects later on. In 1931, though, the only project in motion involved the Powel House, and Wister and her colleagues wasted no time in moving forward with the restoration of the historic mansion.

Landmarks set to work, hiring trusted professionals for the restoration and moving forward with plans to drastically alter the property. The building at 246 South 3rd Street was to be torn down and converted back into a garden as had previously existed at this location. Meanwhile, Landmarks appointed H. Louis Duhring as the "Architect-in-Charge" of the planned restoration work of the Powel House. Draftsmen who worked on the 1930 survey of Old Philadelphia were also employed for the project.³⁷ The Powel House was empty and decrepit, and it lacked proper utilities. Wister desired to install a furnace in the front of the house as an initial step. Landmarks' treasurer Clifford Lewis Jr. objected to this, claiming that people would only donate furnishings to the house if a caretaker was actually living inside. Both Wister and Lewis got their way; a furnace was

³⁵ Clifford Lewis Jr., "The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks," May 16, 1931.

³⁶ Frances Wister to Sir.

³⁷ Frances A. Wister to H. Louis Duhring, June 18, 1931.

installed in the back of the house, and Edith A. Standen, the curator of the Joseph Widener Art Collection in Elkins Park, eventually moved in along with a couple that worked as full time caretakers for the house.³⁸

Much like the Powels had done over a century earlier, Standen utilized the house as a party space. Beginning in late 1934, Standen helped to make the Powel House a common venue for tea parties, hosting as many as sixty people per event.³⁹ Over the ensuing years, Standen invited people from the worlds of art and literature into the house for her parties.⁴⁰ It is unclear how consistently Standen lived in the house, but she was a notable presence in the building for around half a decade.

Meanwhile, the house underwent many physical changes in the 1930s. Landmarks restored some of the house's windows in 1932, and the garden in the lot of 246 South 3rd Street was laid out with brick paths and grass.⁴¹ Over the years, the garden would become Wister's passion project, and Landmarks would hold annual "Garden Day" celebrations.⁴² A myriad of restoration work was accomplished in 1933, including extensive work on the house's backbuilding, new shutters and windows, the addition of a back kitchen, and the addition of trees and diverse vegetation to the garden. Restoration work on the main building lagged behind that of the garden and the backbuilding, but was

³⁸ Clifford Lewis, 3rd, "The Powel House in the 1930's as Recalled by Clifford Lewis 3rd Nearly 50 Years Later," Jan. 11, 1981.

³⁹ Edith A. Standen diary, May 24, 1935. Edith A. Standen Diaries, box 2, folder 3, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, "Progress Already Made," 1933/1934.

⁴² Frances A. Wister to the Friends of "Old Philadelphia," May 1944; Frances A. Wister to the Friends of "Old Philadelphia," May 1955.

accomplished more fully over the next few years. This work included the installation of ornate cornices that hearkened back to the house's eighteenth-century Georgian style.⁴³

Although war in the 1940s may have brought challenges to American organizations similar to Landmarks, Wister's organization remained in steady hands. Consideration was given to cutting down on expenses, but despite occasional problems, the organization was still healthy by the end of the war.⁴⁴ Wister even suggested in the waning days of the conflict that war efforts corresponded to an increase in public interest in the country's forefathers.⁴⁵

Frances Wister died on March 18, 1955, but she spent the entirety of her elder years ensuring that the Powel House would enter Philadelphia's famed pantheon of eighteenth-century historic sites.⁴⁶ Over time, Landmarks acquired three additional Philadelphia mansions that it still administers today, but the Powel House holds a special status. It is the original, flagship house from which the organization launched.

⁴³ "Powel House," 1936/1937.

⁴⁴ George L. Harrison to Frances A. Wister. November 13, 1941.

⁴⁵ Frances A. Wister, "The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks Fourteenth Annual Meeting, Report of the President," March 22, 1945.

⁴⁶ Frances A. Wister to the Friends of "Old Philadelphia." May 1955.

CHAPTER 3

PAST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POWEL HOUSE

Before Tatum

For many of the years between the end of the Powels' residence and the formation of Landmarks, the property at 244 South 3rd Street was just another residence in downtown Philadelphia. There is no evidence that the owners of the house took interest in promoting the house's history. Perhaps merchants and lawyers that owned the Powel House would not have had much motivation to do so. Wolf Klebansky was clearly not enamored with the house's history. Yet even with the lack of effort on the part of the owners to glorify and celebrate the house, the story of the Powels and their hospitality lingered. Efforts to preserve either individual pieces or the entirety of the Powel in the early twentieth century brought it into the news on occasion, and it is evident from bits of press coverage that the story of the Powel's was never completely dormant.

The Powel House was not mentioned often in the press until 1931. However, the events surrounding the house's preservation in the twentieth century make clear that there was a cursory awareness in the city about its history, even before preservation activity occurred. An extensive *Philadelphia Inquirer* article from July 1894 discussed several historic mansions in the region.⁴⁷ One of the mansions mentioned was the Powel House. The author discusses the house within its lavish neighborhood context. The physical attributes of the house are touched upon, such as its garden, but little is said about Samuel Powel himself aside from the fact that he was the mayor and that he lived amongst

⁴⁷ "Historic Mansions: Memories Attached to Old Sweet Brier Mansion in the Park," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 15, 1894.

wealthy neighbors. Further described in the article is the house's fair physical state under the ownership of lawyer L. Theodore Salaignac. The content of this particular article is a mix of historical and aesthetic information, with the Powel House considered as an exemplar in both realms.

The Powel House made the news again with the death of Salaignac eight years later. According to the author of one brief piece, Salaignac "long owned the famous Powell mansion" which was "frequented in Revolutionary times by Washington, Adams, Jefferson and other celebrities."⁴⁸ The Powel House lived a quiet existence during the Salaignac era. And if the Powel House was known for its role as a host to early American dignitaries, this reputation did not lead to immediate public outcry when Klebansky purchased the property for his animal hair business in 1904.

While the house continued to receive only sparse mentions in the press until 1931, it gained attention in other forms of publication during the Klebansky residency. In their 1912 book, Philadelphia authors Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Horace Mather Lippincott provided a notably in-depth account of the Powel House for the time.⁴⁹ Similar in topic but more elaborate than the 1894 *Inquirer* article, Eberlein and Lippincott's *The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and its Neighborhood* highlighted over fifty-six colonial-era properties in and around Philadelphia. Eberlein and Lippincott's brief chapter on the Powel House formed one of the earliest textual narratives of the Powel House.

⁴⁸ "Owned Famous Powell House," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 23 1902.

⁴⁹ Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Horace Mather Lippincott, *The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and its Neighborhood* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1912), 52-56.

As Eberlein and Lippincott write, “Barring dingy and discoloured paint, Samuel Powel’s house at 244 South Third Street shows the same front as when its distinguished owner lavishly entertained the notables of the country and eminent foreigners under its hospitable roof.”⁵⁰ The contrast of the house’s dilapidated state under the ownership of Klebansky and its aristocratic import in the eighteenth century would be brought up years later as a defense for its preservation. Eberlein and Lippincott do not place much stress on this narrative throughout the rest of the chapter, but their dichotomy of the house’s poor state along with its elegance of design was rather unprecedented up until 1912.

Eberlein and Lippincott continue with a description of some of the Powel House’s most notable architectural features, such as its mahogany-lined staircase and grand second floor ballroom. The authors lace these architectural details with eloquent praise for the house’s design. Next, Eberlein and Lippincott discuss the posh surroundings of the house when the Powels resided in it. They note that some elements of the house’s interior “remain to attest former magnificence.”⁵¹ Here, too, they contrast this elegance with the house’s current ramshackle state, as they remark on the disappearance of the original garden and disrepair of the woodcarving. Yet overall, Eberlein and Lippincott are more inclined to imagine the house’s past rather than dwell on its present state.

The purpose for their book, after all, was to highlight the historic mansions of Philadelphia and what made them historic. Eberlein and Lippincott did not attempt to explain why the Powel House fell in to its state of disrepair. Much of the rest of their chapter on the house is concerned with biographical information on Samuel Powel and the house as it existed during the Powels’ residency. Only at the chapter’s end do

⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

Eberlein and Lippincott reference the house's history beyond Elizabeth's sale of the house to William Bingham. The authors note that William Rawle lived there, but they mention no other later owners or residents.⁵² A few of the later residents of the house merit a mention, but for Eberlein and Lippincott, the Powel family story and the house's eighteenth-century ethos are what serve to define the house as significant and historic.

Discussion of the Powel House in print surfaced again during the Klebansky era in a book about Philadelphia's built landscape in 1918. In *The Book of Philadelphia*, author Robert Shackleton is particularly concerned with Philadelphia landmarks, including those that were well known at the time and those such as the Powel House that were less in the public eye.⁵³ Shackleton only devotes one paragraph to the Powel House, but his mention of the house is in response to his personal exploration of the city's older and shabbier sections.⁵⁴ The Powel House, along with the home of Reverend Robert Blackwell, stand as mementos of the past, damaged through age.

Although he does not talk about Samuel Powel, Shackleton does note that the house once played host to Washington and Adams. Shackleton is not as concerned with the story of the house as much as he is with the fact that it is an example of Philadelphia's aging built landscape. He writes of the Powel House, "but it is now dingy of aspect, shuttered close, not remindful of its glory when Washington was a guest here."⁵⁵ Unlike Eberlein and Lippincott, Shackleton does not sense that the house echoes its former brilliance. It seems that he was never able to gain access to the interior of the building,

⁵² Ibid., 56.

⁵³ Robert Shackleton, *The Book of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Penn Publishing Company, 1918).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

which does not appear to have been an issue for Eberlein and Lippincott, and this may have contributed to Shackleton's more pessimistic depiction of the building's disrepair. But it is also possible that the house simply was in a more visibly damaged state by the time Shackleton wrote about the house later on in the decade.

George B. Tatum

Further descriptions of the Powel House through the middle of the twentieth century were few in quantity. In the 1970s though, one study on the Powel House emerged that still looms over all others in terms of its influence on the interpretation of the building. Architecture scholar George B. Tatum wrote the 1976 monograph, *Philadelphia Georgian*, at the request of Landmarks President Frederick Hemsley Levis. Levis noted the work of Historical Society of Pennsylvania Director Nicholas B. Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur in Philadelphia*, in which Wainwright had explored the decoration and furnishings of John Cadwalader's mansion.⁵⁶ In a similar vein to Wainwright, Tatum embarked on a quest to flesh out details concerning the interior of the Powel House as no one had done before.⁵⁷ Yet Tatum's book became influential not only due to his technical exploration of the mansion's interior, but also because of his historical account of the house.

Tatum's well-researched narrative of the house's history forms the book's first chapter, which largely centers on the Powels themselves.⁵⁸ Throughout the rest of the

⁵⁶ Nicholas B. Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur in Philadelphia: The House and Furniture of General John Cadwalader* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1964).

⁵⁷ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, xiii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-30.

study, Tatum is primarily concerned with the house's decoration and furnishings. His narrative thrust gives attention to the state of the house during the Powel residency and the degree to which the house survived into the twentieth century. At the same time, Tatum provides impressive context for the house, as he mentions such figures as Stedman, Klebansky, and Wister. Tatum even gives a nod to the history of historic preservation itself, remarking that it "may now be said to have a history of its own."⁵⁹ Thus, Tatum's book was transitional within the grand narrative tradition of Powel House. In order to write a book on a preserved building, Tatum crafted a narrative that necessarily had to stretch into the twentieth century, even as it was heavily weighted toward the eighteenth century.

The Guide's Manuals

For Landmarks, the Tatum book would prove to be directly useful, as Tatum's discoveries filtered into the organization's tour guide scripts for the Powel House.⁶⁰ Landmarks highly anticipated Tatum's findings, and it reference his name in manuals that were written both before and after the publishing of his book. The scripts grew in detail over the years, and Landmarks used Tatum's book to provide its tour guides with historical context with which they could craft their own interpretations of the house's period rooms.

It is evident from the scripts, though, that Landmarks did not shift from an interpretive focus that centered on the two dominant subjects of the house's lore. Both of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁰ "Sample Talks for Powel House"; Franklin Fleece and Mary Elizabeth Fleece, "Powel House Guide's Manual," 1977; George W. Boudreau and David A. Dashiel III, "The Powel House: A Guide's Manual," 1997; Margaret Siro, Pat Stallone, and Laurie C. Switzer, "Powel House Guide's Manual," 2001.

these aspects, the house's material characteristics and the story of the Powels' residency within the building, formed Landmarks' core interpretive focus from the 1970s until the post-millennial years.

The scripts are suggestive of the type of information about the Powel House that Landmarks had the capability and determination to provide to the public. The timeline that appears in a script written prior to the publication of Tatum's book is primarily concentrated with dates up until William Rawle's purchase of the house in 1805.⁶¹ This timeline only includes two dates regarding Landmarks' ownership of the house, these being the 1931 purchase and the demolition of 246 South 3rd Street in 1932. Following the timeline, the script contains a one-page Powel family history and room-by-room descriptions of the house. It also carries occasional mentions of interesting stories about the Powels, such as their friendship with George and Martha Washington. The script's major purpose, though, was to serve as an aide for tour guides in their interpretation of decorative details and furnishings of the house on the tour circuit.

Scripts from more recent years are generally similar to this early manual, although they contain a larger quantity of information in all aspects. Historian George W. Boudreau published a revised script in 1997 as a result of new research and advice from the house's tour guides.⁶² In his timeline, Boudreau mentions Wolf Klebansky and a fair amount of dates and events beyond the era of the Powel family.⁶³ The one noticeable difference in Boudreau's manual versus the two manuals from the 1970s is that Boudreau

⁶¹ "Sample Talks for Powel House," 2.

⁶² George W. Boudreau and David A. Dashiell III, "A Guide's Manual," 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

supplies his room-by-room script with richer detail about the lives of Samuel and Elizabeth.

In his version of the manual, Boudreau is seemingly focused on providing tour guides with a more nuanced analysis of the house in its eighteenth-century context than had existed in previous iterations of the scripts. However, he does not provide new information about the house within the context of its nineteenth-century and twentieth-century histories. Further revisions to the manual kept Boudreau's structure intact.⁶⁴

Interpreters of the Powel House throughout the years have laid the groundwork for a vast array of individual tales about the building during the Powel residency. Landmarks has certainly played an enormous role in keeping the Powel legacy alive, although that legacy was not forgotten altogether in the years prior to Landmarks' purchase of the house. Undoubtedly, the Powels are vital historical figures in the lore of the house and neighborhood. Yet Landmarks also has the responsibility to keep the house's entire history alive. Alternative narratives about the Powel House are worthy of attention, and Landmarks can only benefit from taking a closer look at what the house's broader history offers.

⁶⁴ Siro, Stallone, and Switzer, "Powel House Guide's Manual."

CHAPTER 4
THREE FRESH NARRATIVES: SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW INTERPRETIVE
DIRECTIONS

Alternative Narratives

Landmarks currently has the opportunity to expand its public interpretation of the Powel House in numerous directions. The organization has explored the story of the house during the Powel residency tirelessly over the past eighty-five years, and the effectiveness of the education on this topic is a major reason that the Powel House is still a regular visit for Philadelphia's locals and tourists. Yet it has been over two hundred years since Elizabeth Powel sold the house, and Landmarks has only managed to present to its visitors a sparse sampling of the house's eclectic history beyond 1798. Because there are so many untouched years and underdeveloped narratives about the house beyond this point, there is, as a result, so much opportunity for Landmarks to utilize new modes of thinking and engagement.

The period between 1904, when Wolf Klebansky purchased the Powel House, and the mid-1930s, when the house was in a state of restoration, has the potential to be immediately useful for Landmarks. Visitors to the house in 2015 may learn something about Frances Wister, but not a detailed recollection of her work, or side narratives that explore how the house transformed during this period. Landmarks has the benefit of a good variety of sources to craft stories about its early twentieth-century history, thanks in part to its vast array of institutional records. These records are comparably far less well

suited for Landmarks to craft stories about the house as it existed in the nineteenth-century.

Such research difficulties do not exist to any large degree for the twentieth century. In this section, my focus is to provide suggestions for how Landmarks can construct stories from the house's transitional period to be utilized practically for the visitor experience. The transition that I refer to is the house's shift in ownership to Landmarks in 1931, but I contend that there are relevant stories that provide additional context for the purchase and revitalization of the property. Along with a narrative about Frances Wister and the formation of Landmarks, I highlight an earlier narrative that concerns Wolf Klebansky and a narrative that focuses on Edith A. Standen in the mid-1930s. From these stories, I construct interpretive plans that act as suggestions to attract or appeal to specific and general audiences.

Wolf Klebansky: Intersections Between the Jewish Community and a Preservationist Movement

This interpretive segment is framed to appeal to the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Wolf Klebansky was not merely a successful businessman. He was also an active member in the local Jewish quarter, a region of the city that not only contained a highly concentration population of Jewish citizens and institutions, but also the neighborhood within which Samuel and Elizabeth Powel had once resided. Some interpreters have portrayed Klebansky as a controversial figure in the history of the Powel House, mainly because of his considerations to demolish the property at 244 S. 3rd St. Yet the house survived and the Klebansky estate ultimately passed along the property to a newly formed preservation organization. Telling the story of Wolf Klebansky not only serves to highlight a lesser-known owner of the Powel House, but it also gives Jewish Philadelphians an added stake in the history of a local landmark.

Klebansky's narrative offers Landmarks a way in which it can present the history of the Powel House as it exists within the context of the local community. Landmarks' eighteenth-century narrative of the Powel House could stand to include more information on how the house fit into the social and cultural life of its block and nearby blocks. But the interpretive segment that I suggest is concerned chiefly with the "Jewish quarter" of Philadelphia. Historian Harry D. Boonin utilizes this term to refer to a space bounded within Spruce Street, Christian Street, South 2nd Street, and South 6th Street in the span of years from 1881-1930.⁶⁵ The Powel House sat one half of a block north of the Jewish

⁶⁵ Boonin, *Jewish Quarter*, 10-18.

quarter's artificial border, but Klebansky was socially and culturally involved in the life of this community.

The Klebansky narrative could be particularly attractive to any of the numerous Jewish institutions within the city of Philadelphia. Such institutions, whether they are cultural, religious, educational, or philanthropic in nature, are prime targets to which Landmarks can market the Powel House's history. Here, I present suggestions on how programming initiatives and an expanded interpretation of the house as it existed during Klebansky's ownership can help Landmarks garner new friendships and loyalties among local Jewish institutions.

Before delving into these suggestions, I should note a few additional uses that Landmarks can benefit from with concern to Wolf Klebansky's narrative. Landmarks could emphasize Klebansky's immigrant status and subsequent financial successes. With this angle, Landmarks would place the Powel House on the map of important immigration historic sites in Philadelphia. Klebansky's narrative may also be useful if Landmarks considers programming initiatives that involve more expansive narratives of history in Society Hill. Though as I contend, the Wolf Klebansky narrative is most easily and immediately relatable to Jewish history.

For this sake, I imagine a tour themed around Society Hill's hidden Jewish history. The Powel House would simply be one stop along this walking tour. Landmarks could run the tour, or at least fill a consultative role. In the case of the latter, Landmarks would advise on the historical interpretation of the Powel House as it relates to Wolf Klebansky and the Jewish quarter. Landmarks could leverage this tour to market the Powel House to a wide range of Jewish institutions in Philadelphia. It could approach

larger alliances such as the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, or individual synagogues and community centers.

Now, I imagine what this tour may look like from the point of view of the audience. As the tour approaches the Powel House, the guide begins a brief discussion of how the house functions within Philadelphia's memory of eighteenth-century social and political life. The guide then explains how the building and surrounding properties represent much more than a colonial and revolutionary landmark. In fact, they are symbols of Jewish immigrant success in Philadelphia, living memories of the city's influx of European Jews especially from countries such as Russia and Germany.

The guide provides a biographical depiction of Wolf Klebansky and his business exploits. Topics for discussion include Klebansky's connections to local synagogues, his philanthropy during wartime, and the growth of his business. All of these topics serve to portray Klebansky as one entrepreneur amongst a group of successful Jewish businessmen operating in the Jewish quarter during the early twentieth century. The guide then brings the audience into the Powel House garden. Now the audience stands on the lot that Wolf Klebansky once used as a home and base for his animal hair importation and manufacturing business. From this point, the guide shifts attention to the Powel House next-door, and frames a story that describes the back-and-forth struggle between Klebansky and Philadelphia preservationists. And it was Landmarks that decided to tear down Klebansky's former home, a reversal of fortune. The tour does not necessarily have to enter the Powel House for the purpose of such a story, although Landmarks may deem it desirable that this does occur.

As such, this walking tour would serve as an educational tool. But I also see the greater potential of Klebansky's story in terms of two significant goals for Landmarks. These goals are to foster the Powel House as a friendly space to the Jewish community in Philadelphia, and on a larger scale, to establish mutually beneficial relationships between Landmarks and local Jewish institutions.

In very much a similar fashion to Landmarks' provision of the Powel House space to the theatre community, the House could also become an hospitable site for Jewish institutions to host events.⁶⁶ At minimum, the Klebansky narrative can serve as a bridge to make such a connection logical and attractive. Landmarks prides itself on the combination of the Powel House's spatial flexibility and historic charm. Beyond the attraction of the Powel House's interior and garden, it also can become a Society Hill space-of-choice that Jewish institutions can turn to for their own programming initiatives. Hopefully, this type of cooperation can help to provide an additional source of funding for Landmarks.

⁶⁶ Landmarks currently has a working relationship with the Mechanical Theatre, which utilizes the Powel House as a performance space.

Edith A. Standen: Reincarnations of Parties at the Powel House in the 1930s

This interpretive segment is based around a young Edith A. Standen, and is themed as a comparative study. The Powel House's eighteenth-century narrative often centers on its role as a setting for the Powels' parties and dinners, during which they drew some of the most famous American names to their home. There is evidence to suggest that Standen was a party planner herself, and like the Powels, she may have used the house as a venue for these parties. Whether or not Standen was the person who actually organized these parties, she recorded the occurrences of such gatherings at the Powel House on multiple occasions, starting around September 1934. Standen's story provides a tangible subject on which Landmarks can inspire visitors to imagine congruent activity within the house in distinct time periods.

Landmarks can use Standen's story to portray the Powel House as an active, bustling local within historical different eras. Standen serves as one of the best examples for how the Powel House came to life again in the aftermath of the Landmarks' purchase of the house in 1931. If Landmarks decides to take advantage of Standen's narrative, it will no longer be limited to describing the house as a lived space only within its eighteenth-century context.

Standen's presence in the daily life of Landmarks' Powel House lends itself well to a discussion of the art community in Philadelphia in the twentieth century. Her friendships and connections may comprise an interesting topic to those within the fine art community in Philadelphia. Because Standen is a relatively unfamiliar name within the

city, though, her connection to the art community would best be expressed as part of a larger story concerning the Powel House.

One stronger use of the Standen narrative is the way in which it can be leveraged to engage younger audiences. Elementary school children may connect more strongly with stories about the house that revolve around parties than they would with discussions of the moldings and other design features in the period rooms. Thus, my first suggestion for Landmarks is to package a story of Edith A. Standen into an engaging, comparative educational lesson for children. There are multiple directions in which Landmarks can spin this idea, but whatever is utilized must be thought-provoking, participatory, and fun for the age of the audience.

Let us consider the back room downstairs as a possible setting for a lesson on Edith A. Standen. The room was originally used as a dining parlor, and the most notable dinner that occurred during the early period of the house was John Adams' "sinful feast." While one half of the comparison remains primarily focused on Adams' sinful feast, Edith A. Standen's mid-1930s tea parties comprise the other half of the comparison. The lesson also includes comparisons of both of historical parties with modern celebrations or feasts. This leads into an imaginative exercise that focuses on the fun, flashy, or relatable aspects of parties, and how the spirit of parties has evolved in American cultural history.

The young members of the audience are encouraged to think of the similarities and differences in manners between those of stately colonial politicians and early twentieth-century upper class couples. Allow the children to consider how the spirit of such parties or large feasts would have differed from their own experiences with family and friends at birthday parties or at Thanksgiving dinners. What would have been

inappropriate in the eighteenth century? What would have been appropriate eighty years ago?

Thinking exercises are eschewed or enhanced with more tactile experiences. Tables are set up, with miniature parties held at different tables. The children are divided into groups and can act out what their ideas of grand celebrations would have been like during different periods of American history. Props are brought out to help the children visualize the differences and provide them with additional hands-on activities.

The tour guide or educator at the helm of this sort of program will be able to provide the young audience with fun facts to help support the imagination of an historic atmosphere within the dining room. The educator will answer questions about the types of food and drink that would have been served at a feast for colonial politicians and lawyers, or at a tea-party among upper-class Philadelphians in the 1930s. Additionally, the educator brings up challenging questions related to the highbrow nature of the parties historically held in the Powel House. Who would not have been welcome at these festivities?

This question actually leads into another advantage of the Standen narrative. Because of the congruencies between the Powel parties and the Standen parties, the Standen narrative contributes to a general lesson on the operation of social class in everyday life for Americans of the past. Perhaps one detail about American history in the 1930s that younger audiences are likely to be aware of is the Great Depression.

However, because of how vital an honest portrayal of class is to the pursuance of good public history, especially within the setting of an historic mansion, this topic is probably best suited for the house's general audience. The Standen narrative offers

Landmarks a good opportunity for self-reflexivity, and Landmarks should consider the contrast of local and national economic struggles with the way in which the Powel House was used in the 1930s. I will save a discussion of self-reflexivity for the next interpretive segment, as Landmarks can more effectively interpret itself when it examines its own founder.

Frances Anne Wister: Institutional History as Exhibit Space

Unlike that of Wolf Klebansky or Edith A. Standen, Landmarks has already given the story of Frances Anne Wister and her colleagues some attention, and for obvious reasons. Wister founded the organization and is thus the paramount figure in the institutional history of Landmarks. She formed the organization in reaction to plans for the Powel House's destruction. For nearly the first decade of Landmarks' existence, the Powel House was the only property that the organization controlled. Yet when one walks through the Powel House, the institutional narrative is all but absent from the experience. Aside from a few photographs of the house from the early twentieth century that hang on a hallway wall, there is no dedicated space in the Powel House that serves to tell the story about the Frances Wister, the restoration, or Landmarks in general.

My proposal for this final interpretive segment is for Landmarks to devote a section of the Powel House to an exhibit on Frances Wister and the Landmarks founders. My focus here is less on Landmarks' ability to attract new audiences and more for the organization's enhancement of the general visitor experience. A new exhibit on Wister and Landmarks may encourage people who have already seen the Powel House to return, but good institutional history is vital in another sense. If an organization engages with its institutional history tactfully and self-reflexively, it can begin to ask difficult questions that may be avoided otherwise. Landmarks does not often present its own past to the public in a formal manner, so an exhibit on the organization should respond to questions of where the organization's footprints are within the physical structure of the Powel House. But reflexive institutional history should go beyond this. It should help to answer

questions regarding Landmarks' status as an historic preservation organization within the greater context of Philadelphia.

In the Powel House, Landmarks allows the material culture to do the talking. Experiencing the house's furnishings and architectural features normally consumes the visitor experience. This can easily obscure the fact that the house was preserved with specific intentions in mind. Indeed, it was Landmarks that manufactured much of the house's material culture, with original furnishings currently sitting in museums. So we have to jump all the way back to the 1920s and 1930s in order to understand how the house transformed into a museum. No person had more of an effect on this transformation than did Frances Wister, a woman who not only represented a growing movement for preserving the colonial past in Philadelphia, but also represented a nationwide phenomenon of female involvement in historic preservation. Thus, an exhibit on Frances Wister and the founding of Landmarks must analyze the early preservation of the Powel House from a critical, contextually minded perspective.

As I imagine how this exhibit would function, one thing to keep in mind is how it would flow with the house's period rooms. Questions relating to this involve physical placement within the house of the exhibit and the exhibit's scale. A key factor here is that Landmarks should improve the way it portrays to its audience the reality of what they experience. The house that the visitor walks through is filled to the brim with eighteenth-century material culture, yet is in many ways a twentieth-century construct. At the same time, an exhibit on the Landmarks narrative has the potential of being overbearing, perhaps interfering with the visitor's desire of taking the tour to begin with. So in terms

of placement, the exhibit should be low-key, as not to overpower the aura of the period rooms but to still have a visible presence.

Considering issues regarding placement, even if Landmarks constructs the exhibit in one of the few un-utilized but potentially available rooms within the house, it should at least avoid interfering with the general flow of a walk through the building. Because many tours of the Powel House tend to end with a stroll through the garden, the room at the end of the first floor corridor is a viable room for discussion. Currently it operates as a multipurpose space, whether for meetings or events. Although it may not end up as the ideal option, for the sake of this interpretive suggestion, this room will be the location of a prospective Landmarks exhibit.

Conceptualizing the space for the exhibit is one issue, but the exhibit's layout and general appearance and function are more problematic. One option is for Landmarks to construct a standard exhibit that would function with detailed elaborations on the few artifacts within the house that directly indicate the house's preservation process. Problematically, these artifacts are currently limited to a few photographs hanging on the wall of the corridor leading to the garden. This is sometimes an area in which interpreters will provide information to visitors on the house's preservation. I personally experienced a few occasions in which visitors taking self-guided tours of the house inquired to me about the sepia photographs that indicate the poor state of the house from the early twentieth century. A Landmarks-specific exhibit that utilizes the standard picture-and-caption format should ideally balance the narrative between Frances Wister's life story and the restoration of the house in the 1930s.

An exhibit of this type would firstly emphasize why it was Frances Wister, and not someone else, that ultimately achieved the goal of obtaining the house after several strenuous decades of preservation tussles. Wister was cultured and cared about the history of the house. But Wister was undeniably an upper class Philadelphia woman, and fit comfortably with nationwide and perhaps citywide trends in historic preservation leadership. It would be valuable for visitors to see, after touring through the period rooms and garden, how Frances Wister emerged among a number of concerned citizens, especially the group of women that together formed the Society of Colonial Dames.

It is with this examination of Wister's social status that Landmarks can produce the most meaningful self-reflexive interpretation of the Powel House's history. Wister's ascendancy in the Philadelphia preservation community did not occur within a bubble. One can look back to the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, which popularized the concept of period rooms in the region.⁶⁷ A number of female-led organizations arose that sought to establish house museums, and such institutions were increasingly nationalistic as the century turned. These organizations flaunted their connections to early American society, and were undoubtedly upper class. The Society of Colonial Dames, which had battled to preserve the Powel House as no other organization did until the formation of Landmarks, was among these organizations.⁶⁸ As such, Wister's formation of Landmarks was not extraordinary on its own.

Because of this, Landmarks should contemplate what it was that made Frances Wister and the organization's foundation unique. Perhaps Landmarks can emphasize the

⁶⁷ Patricia West, *Domesticating History*, 19%.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

year in which it materialized and the years during which it restored the Powel House. The organization itself is proof that the upper class, female-led preservationist movement persisted on in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Landmarks' restoration efforts at the Powel House also coincided with the 1932 bicentennial celebration of George Washington's birth. America's turn toward the glorious past was inextricably tied to the economic toils of 1932.⁶⁹

These grander stories are vital for self-reflexivity, because if Landmarks is to tell its own story, it must be aware of how it was originally a product of its time and the decades leading up to its formation. The implications of this for the visitor experience can be far-reaching, but Landmarks must be willing to ask difficult questions and present them to the public. I will discuss the implications of self-reflexivity in the conclusion.

Aside from exploring Wister's role and the greater context within which she lead the preservation efforts of the house, the exhibit could also be a site for images of the house over the years. This may seem like an obvious objective, but it is particularly vital considering the stigma that some Philadelphia historic sites have as being temporally static. At Old City's most prominent historic site, Independence Hall, the National Park Service has neglected to present the history of the building beyond events that occurred in the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ Basing an exhibit around Landmarks justifies a visual presentation of the evolution of the house and property over its entire history.

The ease of implementing this type of exhibit, which need not be large and overbearing, is enough to make it an appealing option. Landmarks could also consider

⁶⁹ Adam Greenhalgh, "'Not a Man but a God' The Apotheosis of Gilbert Stuart's Athenaeum Portrait of George Washington," *Winterthur Portfolio* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 271.

⁷⁰ Mires, *Independence Hall*, vii-xviii.

a more complex and creative exhibit. Unfortunately, the limited space within the house would hamper a material presentation of the preservation process that does not rely as heavily on photographs. As valuable as my suggested exhibit would be for the interpretation of the Powel House, it would be impractical if it were to interfere with the building's use as an event space.

The creation of an exhibit based around Landmarks and Frances Wister would be a visible signal that Landmarks seeks to become more in-tune with progressive trends in the world of public history. Landmarks should encourage visitors that walk out the door of the Powel House to see other nearby Society Hill historic sites as pieces of a vital urban landscape. No building is fixed or immutable, and the 250-year-old Powel House has certainly experienced a long and dynamic history.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Analysis and Assessment

As of today, Landmarks is a thoroughly active nonprofit organization that operates inside Philadelphia's sphere of historical institutions. In 2014, Landmarks crafted a plan for a campaign that would center on the Powel House's 250th anniversary and involve social media initiatives. The organization eventually expanded the plan to aim for a broader appeal, in which it placed increased emphasis on the general history of Society Hill. In its grant application for The Pew Charitable Trusts, Landmarks referenced certain websites, namely Visit Philly and Hidden City, as leading examples of curious Philadelphians that think carefully about the myths we hear and promote lesser-known narratives. Pew ultimately declined the grant application, and for the moment, Landmarks is in roughly the same position that it was in throughout 2014.

When I analyze Landmarks and compare it to the landscape of forward-thinking historical sites and sites that are stuck in time, I find that, overall, Landmarks is on track to keep up with movements in public history. My opinion of the organization and its leadership is that it is moving in a positive direction in terms of seeking out enticing programming and furthering its connections to Philadelphia's cultural and historical institutions. Above all, the leadership at Landmarks is doing what it needs to do to stay afloat financially, creating a satisfactory foundation of programming and events that keep membership stable at the four historic houses.

With my focus aimed at the Powel House, I have one major concern. I worry that Landmarks is in danger of putting the cart before the horse, pursuing exciting new connections and programming opportunities without ensuring that it has a thorough understanding of the alternative narratives that exist chiefly inside the Powel House. At the same time, I know that Landmarks is absolutely committed to digging out these stories from the archives and the dusty attics. A major reason for which Landmarks brought me in as an intern at the Powel House in the summer of 2014 was to investigate the story of Frances Wister. Throughout this process, Landmarks Executive Director Jonathan Burton encouraged me fully to find the stories forgotten over time, and to even look beyond Wister herself to other interesting and relevant people in the history of the Powel House. The untold narratives are there, and if Landmarks is willing to use those narratives, it must solidify the stories of people such as Klebansky, Wister, and Standen as part of the Powel House's grand narrative.

In simpler terms, Landmarks desires new connections and a modernized brand, but ironically, the Powel House risks being left behind. It is, after all, still a house museum. Realistically, this is something that is difficult to change. There is very limited physical space to work with on the property. Each of the house's publicly accessible rooms, as well as the garden, sticks tightly to the story of Samuel and Elizabeth Powel, and it would be rather unprecedented to permanently and drastically alter the house's period rooms.

Yet Landmarks does desire to transition the Powel House out of its current state, one that is too representative of the negative stereotypes that house museums have garnered both within the public history field and among the public. But compared to a

site such as Eastern State Penitentiary, one that has more ample space with which it can go in bold and creative directions, the Powel House is just not as physically pliable. Landmarks will have to continue to rely on programming, rentals, and relationships with other institutions to continue bringing in money.

Regardless of the physical limitations that an historic house museum contains, the pursuance of new narratives for any of the organization's houses is likely of such little cost that there is no reason why Landmarks should not dig deeper. The intrigue and fun in finding new stories to tell cannot be underestimated either. The product of such searches will serve to inspire those hypothetical board members who do not see the benefit of deviating from the traditional narratives. I believe the leadership of Landmarks is fully capable of developing creative uses for alternative narratives, but it just needs to ensure that it does the due diligence in uncovering them.

Landmarks' future is dependent on careful self-examination. It must recognize that its origins derive from an era in which an upper class, racial majority controlled and left its mark on public historical interpretation. Although Landmarks was not as explicitly exclusive as some of its similar forerunners, its formation was a part of this larger movement. To the organization's credit, it has made strides in working with young minorities at Grumblethorpe.⁷¹ Public history professionals expect young minority populations to be increasingly vital to the health of American museums in the future.⁷²

Landmarks will have to take on the challenge of expanding its outreach to these people at

⁷¹ Grumblethorpe currently has an active youth volunteers program. See: "About Grumblethorpe," Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.philalandmarks.org/grumblethorpe-1>.

⁷² The Center for the Future of Museums, "Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures" (2008), 6-7.

the Powel House, and an expanded historical interpretation is one among several tools that can help the organization to achieve such a goal.

It may seem that the Powel House has few direct connections to the history of Philadelphia's African American population, but there are indeed tangential and even surprising pieces of information that contradict this idea. A more well known issue may be the rising cost of housing in Society Hill beginning in the twentieth century, and the ability of lower class black families to keep up. The complications of this reach back to the long-entrenched African American presence in certain areas of the neighborhood.⁷³ Landmarks may take a close look at how the Powel House functioned as social and cultural battles raged on. Then there is the far less known, perhaps completely forgotten involvement of Frances Wister with African Americans in the school system. In one publication, *Philadelphia Tribune* founder and editor Christopher J. Perry references Frances Wister for her advocacy to prevent black school nurses from treating white children.⁷⁴ Accordingly, he claims that Wister is "one of the chief advocates of this as well as other "jim-crowism" in the public school system, and yet she poses as a friend of the colored people." I do not mention these topics with any specific interpretive programming in mind. However, these are the types of controversial histories that are secretly part of the Powel House's history and the history of its close surroundings.

Landmarks can create personal and institutional relationships as a result of pursuing forward-thinking interpretive techniques. The interpretive techniques that I discuss here, namely the search for untold narratives, the emphasis of narratives that

⁷³ J. Brantley Wilder, "Housing for Society Hill Blacks Remains an Issue" *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 20, 1973.

⁷⁴ Christopher J. Perry, "Colored Philadelphians in Political Positions," in *Who's Who in Philadelphia*, Charles Fred White (Philadelphia: The A.M.E. Book Concern, 1912), 152.

account for underserved members of society, and self-reflexivity, are all door openers to the past. If Landmarks opens those doors, it will find that there is a vast array of angles from which it can market the Powel House. And with an abundance of angles comes an abundance of people and groups it can target. As an example, the promotion of Wolf Klebansky's story not only provides Landmarks with a closer tie to the Jewish community, but it also gives the organization a reputation within the community of public historians that it keeps up with trends in the field. With fresh ideas, Landmarks will be capable of pushing its house museums to the forefront. The hope is that this will garner a reputation for the organization that it is a hospitable working partner with university public history programs, where all of the trends are actively discussed. Ideally, Landmarks and Temple University could at some point develop a mutually beneficial relationship.

It is a hard task to keep up with all of these trends in Philadelphia. The eighteenth-century history of the city is stubborn, and the ease of falling back on it is crucial to why some sites do not keep up. Perhaps even more stubborn is the average person or organization that runs an historic house museum in the United States. If Landmarks devotes itself full-heartedly toward scoping out the incredible histories that exist at the Powel House or its other properties, it will truly become a leader in both the city and the landscape of these museums. The key may be as simple as adopting a new attitude to take full advantage of all that time has to offer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boonin, Harry D.. *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia: A History and Guide, 1881-1930*. Philadelphia: Jewish Walking Tours of Philadelphia, 1999.

Boonin, Harry D. *The Life and Times of Congregation Keshet Israel*. Philadelphia: Harry D. Boonin, 2007.

The Center for the Future of Museums. "Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures," 2008.

de Gorgas, Mónica Risnicoff. "Reality as Illusion, the Historic Houses that Become Museums," *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (2001): 10-15.

Eberlein, Harold Donaldson and Cortlandt van Dyke Hubbard. *American Georgian Architecture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1952.

Eberlein, Harold Donaldson and Horace Mather Lippincott. *The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and its Neighborhood*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1912.

Greenhalgh, Adam. "'Not a Man but a God' The Apotheosis of Gilbert Stuart's Athenaeum Portrait of George Washington," *Winterthur Portfolio* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 269-304.

Kirtley, Alexandra Alevizatos. "Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769–70," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2012): E12-E23.

Kolk, Heidi Aronson. "The Many-Layered Cultural Lives of Things: Experiments in Multidisciplinary Object Study at a Local House Museum in St. Louis," *Winterthur Portfolio* 47, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2013): 161-196.

McMichael, Charles B, comp. *The Municipal Law of Philadelphia: A Digest of the Charters, Acts of Assembly, Ordinances, and Judicial Decisions*. Philadelphia: J.M. Power Wallace, 1887.

Mires, Charlene. *Independence Hall in American Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

Perry, Christopher J. "Colored Philadelphians in Political Positions." In *Who's Who in Philadelphia*, Charles Fred White. Philadelphia: The A.M.E. Book Concern, 1912: 150-153.

Shackleton, Robert. *The Book of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: The Penn Publishing Company, 1918.

Tatum, George B.. *Philadelphia Georgian: The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of Its Eighteenth-Century Neighbors*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1976.

West, Patricia. *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1999.

APPENDIX

NARRATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

The majority of the research for this thesis was conducted in Philadelphia. In the summer of 2014, I began to look into crafting a timeline for the life of Frances Anne Wister and the origins of Landmarks. Luckily, Landmarks has held on to a good deal of its records ever since the organization was founded in 1931. From these records, I was able to compile a research report that acted as an overview of the most enlightening documents in the collection. For those seeking detailed information on the restoration of the house in the 1930s, a good deal of this information can be found in the organization's correspondence documents. Occasional photographs and newspaper clippings can also be found.

Landmarks keeps much of its older records at the Physick House, where the organization is based. Of the useful documents that I discovered, the majority was contained in boxes in the attic of the Physick House. The conditions in the attic are less than adequate, so Landmarks has already begun inquiring with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to transfer the records to an ideal environment. I did encounter a few boxes at the Powel House that contained similar categories of documents to those found at the Physick House.

My research into Edith A. Standen was conducted at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Standen's journals proved useful, although due to the difficulty of procuring research time at the institution's small archival office, I was unable to read Standen's journals beyond 1936.

The research that I conducted concerning Wolf Klebansky was initially inadequate for a detailed explanation of his life at the Powel House. I did find mentions here and there of Klebansky in the records at the Physick House, but overall these were few in number and primarily from the perspective of Landmarks. Luckily, Harry D. Boonin is an expert on the Jewish community in which Klebansky lived and work. Boonin has already conducted a remarkable amount of research into Klebansky. His two books proved immensely important for my ability to present a narrative about Klebansky.