CONCEALED CERTAINTY AND UNDENIABLE CONJECTURE: INTERPRETING MARGINALIZED HERITAGE

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“Biographers, of all writers, have need of prayers, and answered prayers. The graceful angles and sinuations of clean prose may finally be chiseled from the language, but what of the material itself? How can the biographer know when enough is known, and known with sufficient certainty? What about secrets, what about errors, what about the small black holes where there is nothing at all? What about the wranglings among minor characters, the withholding of facts for thoughtful and not-so-thoughtful reasons—or their mishandling—and this not even in the present but in the past, hidden in letters, in remembered conversations, in reams of papers? And what about the waywardness of life itself—the proclivity toward randomness—the sudden meaningless uplift of wind that tosses out one sheet of paper and keeps another? What about the moment that speaks worlds, as the saying goes, but in the middle of the night, and into deaf ears, and so is never heard, or heard of? I would not be a biographer for all the tea in China.”

– Mary Oliver, “Steepletop”¹

Abstract

This thesis explores the predicament of interpreting historic sites that represent under-documented and otherwise underrepresented communities. After discussing the reinterpretation of sites related to the story of slavery—such as the Underground Railroad, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg—as a precedent, it focuses on house museums linked to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Five museums in New York State exemplify respective challenges to interpretation: the evolving language of identity, the questions of biographical and site-based relevance, political controversy, and difficulties arising from stakeholders and resources. These case studies contribute to the conclusion that interpreters should not categorically suppress controversy and informed conjecture at historic sites, as both can contribute to a site’s ongoing heritage narrative.
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Introduction and Precedents

At a time when studies show American public opinion beginning to bend in favor of rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, the historic preservation movement does not sufficiently reflect this cultural shift. While the preservation field has otherwise begun to embrace social diversity, integrating the histories of ethnic minorities into a broader cultural heritage, marginalization of the history of LGBT people continues. It has been over a decade since New York City’s Stonewall Inn—site of the 1969 riots widely considered the catalyst of the LGBT civil rights movement—became the first site added to the National Register in recognition of significance to LGBT history, yet Stonewall remains one of only two recipients of this distinction. (The other, Frank Kameny’s house in Washington, D.C., was added at the end of 2011.) Although certain professionals in the preservation field have observed the need for documentation of sites emblematic of LGBT heritage, as well as for improved interpretation at LGBT-related sites already preserved for other historical significance, there has been no organized effort to ensure this work. As Moira Kenney asks (a question no less relevant for the fact she is referring to the planning field), “How can a history so poorly understood and skeptically approached be easily integrated into a field that... has only recently begun to explore the experiences of... other marginalized groups whose oppression is more universally acknowledged?”¹ Indeed, the nature of LGBT heritage poses a new set of challenges that preservationists must face in order to incorporate this marginalized history into an encompassing heritage more representative of American diversity.

Perhaps the most useful precedent for this work is the preservation of the Underground Railroad, a secret and informal network of escape routes for slaves, primarily in operation between 1830 and 1865. It led from the southern United States up through the northern states to Canada, as well as to Mexico and the Caribbean. This large geographic area and the wide variety of sites involved, from landscapes to small hiding places, are only part of the challenge of interpreting the Underground Railroad. There is also the fact that by its very nature, this was a clandestine network, so the history of the sites and routes was generally not documented and was maintained instead through oral tradition. Historians will never know exactly how many people were involved and who all of them were. Because of the degree of uncertainty arising from lack of documentation and suppression of fact, as well as historians’ general hesitance to discuss slavery until recently, this heritage draws easy parallels with LGBT heritage. As of the 1990s, some research had been done on the history of the Underground Railroad, but information about the current condition of the related sites and structures was limited, so many of them were in danger of being lost or destroyed. In 1995 the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Advisory Committee suggested to Congress a National Underground Railroad Commission, and the results of their study were ultimately published. The National Park Service study specifically acknowledges that, “Scholars probably will never fully learn the significance of the Underground Railroad.” Still, preservationists are faced with the task of assessing the significance of and providing interpretation for these sites, even while lacking full documentation and understanding of them. Finding solutions to these challenges would

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have useful applications for other communities and types of sites; it seems, perhaps, that the National Park Service has developed one such solution.

Some interpretations of related sites had already been completed before the National Park Service study. The Levi Coffin home in Fountain City, Indiana was restored in 1970 to the period of its use as a stop on the Underground Railroad, as were the Ripley House in Rankin, Ohio, and the Talman/Milton House in Janesville-Milton, Wisconsin. However, these interpretations usually focused on a central figure, site, or route, without providing interpretation of the Underground Railroad’s context and national linkages. The National Park Service identified forty-two sites as potential new national historic landmarks, which was the first step in establishing an area eligible to become a new unit of the Park Service. In writing the nominations, they cross-checked resources to pursue accuracy; in particular, they carefully evaluated oral accounts but did not immediately discount them since they were often the only evidence for information on the African American experience. The study says oral tradition “must be judged for reliability and balanced with customary research methodology,” and later adds, “Where traditional associations cannot be documented, ethnographical analysis of symbols and contextual significance can explore why so many communities and families have claimed ties to the Underground Railroad since the Civil War, just as there are so many claims for buildings as sites where ‘George Washington slept.’” Oral tradition and other related traditions such as songs and crafts should be identified as resources and “can be as effective in creating a

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3 Special Resource Study 45, 63.
sense of authenticity in the visitor as interpretation linked with an existing structure or archeological site."\(^4\)

The result of the National Park Service study was to establish in 1998 the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, a recognized system of sites that would receive support from the Park Service in preserving and providing educational programming about the Underground Railroad story. This system reflects the fact that no single site or route completely characterizes the Underground Railroad, and also grants recognition to sites that have been neglected or altered to the extent that they are not eligible for the National Register but are still integral to the story. The Network of Freedom requires that sites be associated with some type of documentation and interpretation, but that type is left relatively open. The Park Service also encourages the development of state organizations to preserve sites in the Network of Freedom.\(^5\) In a relatively short span of time, the Underground Railroad has emerged from being a hidden history to a cultural resource—even producing an official publication in the U.S. Government bookstore. Besides the challenge of interpreting a controversial, politically and racially charged subject that in the past has been suppressed, there are other theoretical issues at stake, especially the lack of documentation. Interpretations are often revised based on newly discovered information or new priorities, but how can they be revised to include underrepresented histories when so much of the story can arguably be called conjecture? And how can the interpreter mitigate the potential damage of ultimately being disproven?

\(^4\) Special Resource Study 63.
The Park Service offered a solution to these questions in establishing the Network to Freedom. They created a system of recognition reflecting the characteristics of the Underground Railroad, and most importantly, they are inclusive of oral traditions and present them with honesty, discussing conjecture as such and moreover discussing why it is necessary. The Park Service website even includes a page called “Memory, Myth, and the Underground Railroad” that says, “Many of the stories, people and sites of Underground Railroad activity exist only through the oral tradition, through stories passed down through generations without written corroboration.” In this way, the National Park Service has recognized and interpreted heritage through a means that does not run the risk of being disproven, and has contributed to a discussion of evolving preservation practices. These ideas can be applied to preserving the stories of other underrepresented and undocumented communities, a task at the forefront of the preservation movement today.

It has only been in the last twenty years that historic sites have begun to shine a light on their connections to the experience of slavery. As an illustration of this point, there is a only single instance of the word “slave” in the 1974 official guidebook to Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington; it elsewhere describes enslaved people in passing as “servants” and compliments Washington’s skills at managing so many people. In contrast, the 2001 guidebook includes an entire section on the slaves’ life, quarters, and tasks, and another section on the Slave Burial Ground and Memorial on the property. At Thomas Jefferson’s home of Monticello, the 1967 official guidebook, reprinted in 1982, does not use the word “slave” even once. The first page of the 1997 official guidebook introduces the site by saying, “Monticello was home not only to Jefferson and his large family but also to as

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many as 135 slaves who worked the plantation's four farms, helped construct the house and outbuildings, and labored to perform the requisite household tasks.” It includes sections on Jefferson's conflicting views about slavery, on the archeological work that helped to provide information about the slaves' lives, and even features a four-page spread that is hardly subtle, bearing a symbol for each person on the plantation and thus illustrating the degree to which slaves outnumbered family members. According to Fraser Neiman, the Director of Archeology at Monticello, “Public interest in slavery at Monticello is strong, and visitor reactions to Monticello’s recent efforts to highlight the central role played by slavery at Monticello have been overwhelmingly positive.”

Reinterpretation of slavery has also extended beyond the traditional house museum form. Not long after opening “the world’s largest living history museum” to the public in the 1930s, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation hired African Americans to portray slaves. They lived in segregated dorms, and black visitors could tour the grounds on a designated day each week; otherwise, the history of slavery went unaddressed, despite the fact that blacks comprised up to half of the region's population in colonial times. By 1979, in response to critiques that the town's interpretation was literally whitewashing history, the Foundation hired three black interpreters to launch an African American interpretation and presentations department. Fifteen years later—and five years after replicas of slave

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7 Fraser Neiman, Email Interview, 30 April 2012.
9 Manteuffel.
Janofsky.
quarters were built five miles from Williamsburg at Carter’s Grove—this department made a bold move, as well as national news. On October 10, 1994, Colonial Williamsburg reenacted a slave auction with four costumed, black employees, including the department’s director Christy Coleman, playing the roles of slaves up for bidding. (Fig. 1.) While Williamsburg has included some degree of performance in its interpretative planning for decades, the auction reenactment attracted a great deal of criticism as soon as it was announced. The local NAACP expressed outrage and organized a protest at the event, after receiving numerous telephone calls from people concerned that Williamsburg was sensationalizing slavery for entertainment value. In response, Coleman defended the program to The New York Times: “This is just the natural progression of what we’ve been doing. I recognize that this is a very, very sensitive and emotional issue. But it is also very real history, and it distresses me, personally and professionally, that there are those who would have us hide this or keep it under the rug.”

The reenactment went on without significant interruption and had an audience of hundreds. Afterward, the NAACP’s state director Jack Gravely, who had attended expecting to protest, told a television reporter, “To come here and see this and say I wasn’t moved by it . . . To say I’m not in a position to reconsider would be lying to you. What changed was this. Pain had a face, indignity had a body, suffering had tears. We saw all of that.” Despite the highly publicized controversy, and perhaps also because of it, Williamsburg developed additional programming along the same lines. In 1999, Williamsburg’s annual theme or storyline was “Enslaving Virginia,” entailing tours that not only included but specifically focused on the history of slavery in

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10 Janofsky.
the colonial town. As Karen E. Sutton, one of the interpreters in the African-American Programs & History Department, recalled, negative responses to the resulting interpretation’s “uncomfortable truths” sometimes came from both white and black visitors. For example:

Some visitors, both African American and white, are surprised and even offended to see whites working at the Slave Quarters and leading Afrocentric tours and lectures, including the "Other Half" tour, the "Enslaving Virginia" tour, and the "Enslaving Virginia" lecture. A few have even gone so far as to refuse to listen to the white interpreter, preferring to either demand an African American tour guide, to wait until an African American tour guide was available, or to leave the lecture after making their feelings known. In cases like this, at the Slave Quarter, an African American interpreter usually comes forward to defend the white one, telling the visitor that none of us is in character, that the Foundation has trained all of us with the same information, and that the white person knows the subject matter.12

Other reactions from visitors, according to Sutton, ran the gamut of emotions, from surprise to anger to tearful apology for ancestors’ involvement in the slave trade. In any case, Williamsburg succeeded in garnering new attention to the history of slavery. Arising from this groundbreaking programming, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s mission now clearly states, “Costumed interpreters tell the stories of the men and women of the 18th-century city—black, white, and native American, slave, indentured, and free—and the challenges they faced.”13

Taking a different tactic that was similarly provocative, the Maryland Historical Society invited African American artist Fred Wilson to perform an intervention on their

13 “Our Mission: That the Future May Learn from the Past.”
collections called *Mining the Museum*. In 1992 (only two years before the Williamsburg slave auction), Wilson curated a series of displays placing objects from the Society's holdings in new combinations, from which new contexts arose. Alongside more conventional objects, he featured items that had never been exhibited, bringing the painful history of slavery to light in a startling way. An antique baby carriage became the display case for a Ku Klux Klan hood; a standard case labeled “Metalwork, 1723-1880” held a set of slave shackles among shiny Baltimore repoussé sterling goblets. (Fig. 2.) Reviewer Judith E. Stein described the display she viewed as:

> the most dramatic tableau of the exhibition innocuously titled “Cabinet Making 1820-1910” . . . a starkly constructed cruciform whipping post ringed by a variety of ornate Victorian chairs. A potent symbol of the horrors of slavery, the post had hibernated in MdHS furniture storage for decades (hence the irony of the classification "Cabinet Making"). As I confronted Wilson’s unpeopled scenario of punishment as public spectacle, I sensed my complicity as a viewer and was discomforted, as Wilson surely intended.14

Wilson’s provocative narrative techniques maximized the surprise of discovery as visitors encountered the neglected past of slavery: “The objects chosen, and the sly twists of Wilson’s juxtapositions, call attention to the biases that normally underlie historical exhibitions, thus subverting and shattering them.”15 The installation received significant local and national attention, and its run was extended through February 1993; it remains the most popular show in the Maryland Historical Society’s 150-year history.16 The Society’s online archive maintains photographs of the exhibition in a featured category.

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16 Judith Wilson 2.
alongside such subjects as “American Civil War” and “Women’s History.”\textsuperscript{17} Both the Williamsburg slave auction and \textit{Mining the Museum} represent relatively early, radical interpretive efforts to uncover the story of slavery; such efforts serve as precedents for revealing and preserving LGBT stories. Granted, there are significant differences between the heritage of slavery and LGBT heritage. Because LGBT people are not a visible minority, and because the understanding of sexuality has evolved through time in ways that do not apply to race, LGBT stories can be more difficult to identify, as well as to confirm due to a frequent lack of physical evidence. In addition, notions of privacy and comfort levels in addressing sexual topics can further complicate the telling of these stories. LGBT heritage lacks the relatively cohesive narrative arc of slavery’s chronology. Still, elements from the interpretation of slavery can inform that of the LGBT community’s similarly underrepresented heritage. For example, it is helpful to have someone from the community guiding, or at least involved with, the preservation effort, although ideally this will not always be necessary, once marginalized heritage finds its place within the mainstream. Most significantly, preservationists should find a means of interpretation that is both novel, using a different format that suits a different type of heritage, but at the same time integrated into the museum or site’s existing approach—live interpretation, in the case of Williamsburg, and at the Maryland Historical Society, using their existing collections.

In this thesis, I examine the challenges of reinterpreting sites, already otherwise recognized, through an LGBT lens. In particular, I explore the interpretation of sites involving controversy, when the nature of historical facts leads to contention and concealment, as well as conjecture, when evidence is unconfirmed but nonetheless lends

\textsuperscript{17} “Collections Online,” Maryland Historical Society <http://www.mdhs.org/digital-images>.
significance to the site. It is important to elucidate the nuances of my use of the word “conjecture.” In many cases, the fact that a historic figure had an affectionate relationship with a person of the same sex is entirely clear. No one should purport to know the intimacies of someone else’s relationship, so proof of such should not be any more necessary to discuss homosexual relationships than it is for heterosexual relationships; this is not the sense in which I refer to conjecture. Conjecture arises when considering how that person would have identified his or her sexual identity in the language of both his or her time as well as ours, and when considering whether we ourselves should categorize the historic relationship as LGBT. I have narrowed my focus to the house museums of publically celebrated individuals—a photographer, two poets, where the potential interrelation of life and work provides the task of interpretation with an additional layer of complication. As the roots of the preservation movement, house museums are viewed as the most conservative and traditional form of preservation, and I suggest that my discussion of the interpretation of under-documented and marginalized heritage belongs to a wider ongoing conversation about the twenty-first-century relevance of house museums. The heart of this thesis consists of five chapters, each examining a potential challenge to the interpretation of LGBT-related historic sites: vocabulary, biographical relevance, site relevance, political controversy, and stakeholders/resources. Each chapter features a key case study of a site that I have visited, all of which are located in New York State: Clear Comfort, Steepletop, the Walt Whitman Birthplace, Val-Kill, and Manitoga.

For each site, my methodology was to consider outside interpretation of the historic person’s life through biography, and then off-site interpretation—brochures, websites, and other publicity—as well as on-site interpretation, the signage and tours that provide an
immediate interface between the visiting public and the site. When possible, I toured the sites without initially announcing my thesis work, in order to ensure that I was receiving the same experience as the general public. Questions that I considered during the research process included the following: What is the dominant narrative of the interpretation? What are the sources of the interpretation? How are these sources acknowledged? Is speculation included in the interpretation; if so, how? Is sexuality acknowledged or addressed; if so, how, and using what vocabulary? In turn, this work produced new questions that do not necessarily have clear answers. Why are biographies much more open about sexuality than house museums? Does scholarly work address a different audience or accomplish a different task from museum interpretation? Is it because interpreters are uncomfortable delivering these narratives face-to-face? How can staff discomfort be addressed, especially at smaller museums that rely on dedicated volunteers? Why has the LGBT community been disenfranchised from the museum world despite there being so many professionals in the field? Is it the ethical responsibility of museums to include LGBT stories? Ultimately, as my case studies will illustrate, controversy and conjecture should not be categorically suppressed from interpretation, as both can contribute to a site’s ongoing heritage narrative. Inclusiveness requires new thinking about interpretation.
I. Vocabulary

Key Case Study: Clear Comfort

A primary challenge in interpreting LGBT heritage arises from the evolving vocabulary of sexuality; for better or for worse, sexual identity has not always been as expressly defined as it is by contemporary labels. Today’s reliance on a language of identity dictates an ever-expanding lexicon to accommodate various circumstances and communities. Current political correctness has generated the perhaps cumbersome acronym “LGBTQQIA” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Allies), and new terms—boi, genderqueer, pansexual, etc.—are coined to express individual affiliations and self-conceptions.1 Furthermore, the reappropriation of labels with a history of pejorative context—dyke, butch, queer, etc.—has been a significant element of the gay rights movement since the 1980s, much as the black community has reclaimed epithets once deemed derogatory.2 The current linguistic development of sexuality parallels the original rise of such language over a century ago.3 The Oxford English Dictionary lists Psychopathia Sexualis, Krafft-Ebing’s study of the new science of sexology which was published in English in 1892, as the first citation of the word “homosexual.”4 Scholars often attribute the emergence of homosexuality as a category, rather than an act, to Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial for “acts of gross indecency” between men; journalists covering the trial grappled with describing the charges without breaking obscenity laws, and with the newly-developing vocabulary. In the midst of this discursive turmoil, the homosexual/

4 Oxford English Dictionary, as quoted in Rosner.
heterosexual dichotomy of identity emerged.  

Labeling of any person’s non-heterosexuality is often not straightforward due to ambiguity or discrepancy in the historical record, in cases where that record addresses sexuality at all. Particular challenges arise in transcribing the heritage of individuals who lived before and during the late-nineteenth-century period of linguistic transition; more than a matter of whether and how identity was recorded, the language itself was in flux. Either out of intolerance or else a desire to avoid factual inaccuracy regarding same-sex relationships, historians and preservationists have often resorted to indefinite terms and modifiers that suggest degrees of familiarity—friend, close friend, companion, longtime companion—without the implied sexual intimacy of partner. Given the contemporary extension of marriage equality and accompanying legal complications, the confusing word bank for future preservationists will also include husband, wife, and spouse. In “House Museums or Walk-In Closets?” (which focuses on male-associated homes), Joshua G. Adair recounts the too-frequent experience of house museums’ clumsy attempts to sidestep homosexuality. He compares this evasion to Jennifer Eichstedt’s notion of “‘trivialization or deflection,’ in reference to ‘those sites in which slavery, the enslaved, or African Americans are mentioned, but primarily through mechanisms, phrasing, and images that minimize or subordinate them.’” Similarly, house museums can use language to deflect discussion of sexuality:

In some situations, museums obliquely refer to the homosexuality of the owner of a historic home - but visitors

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6 That said, I will generally use the term “partner” when referring to same-sex relationships, without intentionally inferring sexual intimacy, in this thesis for the sake of simplicity.

cannot consistently decode the obfuscating language used to describe such a man. Curators and docents alike might intimate some "difference" about a "bachelor" who helped collect the items in the museum, but such references seem to be delivered as a kind of aside, the verbal equivalent of a "wink-wink, nudge-nudge' that is meant to signal either disapproval or a sophisticated acceptance sotto voce.\textsuperscript{8}

Language provides a crucial interface between the physical fabric of a site and the public; in the context of heritage storytelling, the vocabulary of sexual identity merits grappling.

This challenge is exemplified by the Alice Austen House, also known as Clear Comfort, on Staten Island. (Fig. 3.) Clear Comfort was the home and studio of Alice Austen (1866-1952), who has been called the “earliest American woman of importance in photography”—as well as the home of her partner of over fifty years, Gertrude Tate.\textsuperscript{9} The house has been recognized for both its architectural and cultural significance; it was designated a New York City Landmark in 1971 on the basis of its architectural interest in addition to its having been the notable photographer’s residence. The designation report describes the building’s progressive transformation from a circa 1700 Dutch farmhouse, purchased in 1844 by Alice’s grandfather, to the picturesque Gothic Revival cottage it has remained since the time of Alice and Gertrude.\textsuperscript{10} The 1992 National Historic Landmark Nomination report provides a much more detailed account of Clear Comfort’s various alterations, as well as an extensive statement of Alice’s importance in the American photographic canon. The report observes that, in addition to the exceptional skill with

\textsuperscript{8} Adair 274.

For the purposes of emphasizing the significance of personal life, I have referred to the primary occupants of my five case studies by their first names throughout this thesis.
which she documented New York life around the turn of the twentieth century, what set her apart from other contemporary photographers was that “many of Austen’s pictures explored not only conventional Victorian morals, but also gender roles,” including showing female friends in intimate poses and encouraging them to cross-dress and assume masculine poses. Speculating that, “perhaps her rebellion against conventional Victorian standards explains the fact that Austen never married,” the report notes that Alice and “friend Gertrude Tate formed a fifty-year partnership in which each complemented the other.”  

Little attention seems to have been paid to Alice and Gertrude’s so-called friendship until the house was “thrown into a cultural war” in 1994, when a New York Public Library exhibition, in honor of the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, included one of Austen’s homoerotically suggestive photographs and, even more significantly, labeled her as a lesbian. This identity had not previously been included in the house’s interpretation, and the house museum’s caretakers were unwilling to espouse it. In fact, the museum’s board threatened to close the house as a debate swelled over whether Alice’s supposed lesbianism was being intentionally suppressed, or whether it was a fact irrelevant to the interpretation of Clear Comfort’s historic significance.  

According to Carl Rutberg, Executive Director of the house since 2002:

The argument had created divisions among board members, between the board and the prior executive director, and between the Alice Austen House and segments of the public. At the core was the word ‘lesbian.’ Either she was or she wasn’t. To me, the argument wasn’t very interesting. What fascinated me was Alice Austen, her work, and her life. And it didn’t take

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much research to conclude that Gertrude Tate was the most important person in Alice Austen’s life.\textsuperscript{13}

The debate was marked by a 1994 protest at the house held by the Lesbian Avengers, a group whose manifesto proclaimed “creative activism: loud, bold, sexy, silly, fierce, tasty and dramatic.”\textsuperscript{14} Maxine Wolfe, one of the group’s founders, recalled that the idea of the protest came from a woman writing a thesis on Alice Austen. The woman had been doing research at the Staten Island Historical Society and the Alice Austen House, but after she discussed Alice and Gertrude’s relationship when being interviewed by the local paper and speaking at a forum for the Society, the House staff would no longer assist her work and “totally washed away [Alice’s] lesbianism.” The woman informed the Lesbian Avengers that the House was denying Alice’s relationship and identity, and the group planned action.\textsuperscript{15}

The protest was captured on film by lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer for her film \textit{The Female Closet}.\textsuperscript{16} Hammer reflected on the event in her 2010 biography:

At the time I shot the film, the Alice Austen House board members were homophobic and denied that Austen was a lesbian. The Lesbian Avengers, an activist contingent, confronted them one day on the front lawn waving a poster of this photo [Fig. 4]. A shouting match ensued with ‘she was’ and ‘she wasn’t’ echoing across the front lawn.\textsuperscript{17}

Whether “she was” or “she wasn’t” a lesbian, however, cannot be so categorically affirmed or denied. Despite the Lesbian Avengers’ boldly executed intentions of correcting Alice’s incomplete historical representation—they carried inner tubes labeled “Dyke

\textsuperscript{13} Rutberg 6.
\textsuperscript{15} Maxine Wolfe, Phone Interview, 31 March 2012.
Preserver”—their amendment was itself incomplete. (Fig. 3.) Alice and Gertrude met in 1899, during the original period of sexuality’s lexical transition (Oscar Wilde’s trial took place in 1895). At the same time, partnerships between women were referred to as “Boston marriages,” a term coined in the 1880s as a result of the prevalence of such relationships among independent, educated women in eastern cities. According to lesbian historian Lillian Faderman, such women:

rejected the term ‘lesbian’ for themselves because it was associated in their day with lower-class outlaw behavior and perversity. Had they lived in our day, however, when the stigma against gays and lesbians has been hugely diminished and federally-legalized same-sex marriage may soon become a reality, it is probable that these women, who committed themselves to one another for life, would not have eschewed the term ‘lesbian’ to identify themselves.¹⁸

While attention-grabbing and perhaps appropriate in the context of the Lesbian Avengers’ activism, identifying Alice as a lesbian or dyke is inaccurate without clarifying that, given her historic context and the evolution of vocabulary, she would probably not have ascribed to that identity. More than simply the neglect of label use, reference to the etymology and connotation of such words is rarely included in discussions related to site interpretation. Still, to the credit of early LGBT activists and cultural commentators, their use of anachronistic labels served a purpose beyond interpretation; language provided them with the means of drawing attention to the cause of gay liberation, a phenomenon which itself should be considered a past element of LGBT heritage. From 1975 to 1979, New York lesbians Liza Cowan and Penny House published their own “Magazine of Lesbian Culture and Analysis” called DYKE, A Quarterly. In 1976 (two decades before the New York Public Library’s Stonewall exhibition “outed” Alice), they published an article about Alice—and

¹⁸ Faderman 7-8.
“Gertrude Tate, Alice’s lover”—that spoke explicitly of Alice’s sexuality from the first sentence: “Alice Austen was a Lesbian born on Staten Island, NY in 1866.”19 (Fig. 4 and 5.) Cowan and House are fully aware of the dangers of ascribing contemporary understandings of sexual identity to historical figures. “On the other hand,” said Cowan, “we called Alice a Lesbian in our article because in those days, we weren’t even thinking about the shifting language of categorization. We just wanted to claim her. Which adds another layer to the puzzle of categorization.”20

In the years since the LGBT community first claimed Alice, the question of her lesbianism seems to have had little effect on the house's official interpretation until recently. Visitors to the house museum enter the vestibule to find hung on the wall—amid a collection of Alice’s photos, several of them subtly suggestive of homoeroticism—a “welcome” sign that provides a brief overview of Alice’s life, describing her independent personality and focusing on her legacy as a photographer. The sign does make reference to Gertrude, though in the negative context of leaving—not living in—the house: “In 1945, Alice Austen and Gertrude Tate, her companion, were forced to leave their beloved Clear Comfort.” One of the several brochures used to advertise the house museum also mentions Gertrude, this time in the context of Alice’s general unconventionality: “Austen broke away from the constraints of her time. . . She never married, and instead spent fifty years with Gertrude Tate.” The same brochure declares that, “The best way of honoring Alice Austen is not by creating a mausoleum filled with the past but by infusing her house with creativity, excitement, fun, and a willingness to take risks. Which is what we try to do with all the

20 Liza Cowan, Email Interview, 29 April 2012.
activities we present.” These activities—including photography programs at the house for schoolchildren—are indeed an appropriate means of honoring Alice and infusing the site with contemporary relevance. However, the interpretation of the house itself has suggested a mausoleum-quality stagnancy.

The majority of presented information about Alice’s life derives from a twenty-minute video that visitors are invited to view, and a biography of Alice by Ann Novotny available along with a collection of Alice’s photographs for visitors’ perusal; both resources, while informative and engaging, date from the mid-1970s and provide an incomplete version of Alice’s story. Novotny, it should be noted, was in fact a lesbian, and while her book, *Alice’s World*, only obscurely describes the nature of Alice and Gertrude’s relationship and refers to them as friends, Novotny was aware that they were partners. In fact, she spent a day in 1976 with Cowan and House of *Dyke, A Quarterly*, and provided all of the information about Alice and Gertrude that they included in their article. According to Cowan, Novotny could not fully address Alice and Gertrude’s relationship in her book because of the publisher and the time period. Similarly, the museum’s video does not even include mention of Gertrude, though she spent decades with Alice in the house; instead, in the context of Alice’s unconventionality and being “very much of a personality,” the video tactfully notes that, “Alice Austen was never to marry,” though she “had no shortage of suitors.” Similarly, the house’s website, until very recently, provided a “complete, illustrated biography of Alice Austen” that made no intimation at Gertrude’s existence; she was mentioned once on the website in “A History of the House” as Alice’s

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22 Liza Cowan, Twitter Interview, 28 April 2012.
Liza Cowan, Email Interview, 28 April 2012.
“longtime friend.” Although the house museum’s few references to Gertrude certainly contribute to a more accurate picture of Alice’s life, the dominant interpretation has been the remnant of a period when Alice’s relationship was deemed detrimental to her historic reputation or else unworthy of mention.

However, coincidentally, in the time since I began this thesis, the interpretation of the Alice Austen House has turned an exciting corner. Executive Director Rutberg notes that the main problem with producing a new video is its cost of $200,000, a figure he can state because he is currently working with Barry Lewis and James Nicolor to produce a new one. He has also affirmed that “the Lesbian Avengers event certainly is part of the history of our house,” and said that while there is not enough space in the house to discuss the event, it could perhaps be discussed in a temporary exhibit or on the house’s new website. The website launched on April 23, 2012, and represents a vast improvement over its predecessor; without labeling Alice’s sexuality, it straightforwardly describes her loving relationship with Gertrude. In a section called “Her Life,” the website incorporates Gertrude into Alice’s biography:

On one such summer excursion in 1899, visiting a Catskill hotel known as "Twilight Rest," Alice met Gertrude Tate, who was recuperating there from a bad case of typhoid fever. Gertude was twenty-eight, a kindergarten teacher and professional dancing instructor, who worked to support her younger sister and widowed mother in Brooklyn. Judging from the small personal photo album that commemorates that summer, Gertrude’s spontaneous gaiety and warm humor enchanted Alice, who was then thirty-three. Gertrude began regularly to visit the Austen House, then to spend long summer holidays in

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24 Carl Rutberg, Email Interview, 15 March 2012.
Carl Rutberg, Phone Interview, 30 March 2012.
Europe with Alice. But not until 1917, when her younger sister and mother gave up their Brooklyn home, did Gertrude, overriding her family's appalled objections over her "wrong devotion" to Alice, finally move into Clear Comfort. Alice and Gertrude wished to be buried together, but their families denied the wish.25

The website notes in the section called “Her Home,” “For Alice and Gertrude Tate, her longtime partner who had lived at Clear Comfort since 1917, leaving was a heart-wrenching experience.” In addition, photographs of the couple feature annotations that make their relationship clear. (Fig. 6.) The Alice Austen House has also begun to digitize their collection of Alice’s photographs for inclusion on the website: “We will continue to add photographs as well as information, and we hope to have our entire collection online by the fall of 2012. Let us know if you recognize a face or a place. And share with us your interpretation of the photographs.”26 That the museum’s administration acknowledges interpretive gaps and is taking steps to amend them is highly encouraging. Slowly, the house is not only revealing its connection to the LGBT community, but also embracing it.

According to Rutberg, “I am thrilled that the LGBT community claims Austen. The thing with Austen is that a lot of people claim her: feminists, preservationists, photographers, gardeners, tennis players, etc. So many feel so passionate about her and the house.” On April 26, it was announced that the Alice Austen House was one of forty historic sites in New York City chosen to vie for a grant from Partners in Preservation, a joint project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and American Express. The public has one month to vote for their favorite site on the list; the four top-ranking sites will receive their grant requests in full, with the remaining funds distributed among the other sites. Rutberg

contacted GLAAD (Gays & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) to suggest that they begin a campaign in support of the house’s bid: “This is a great opportunity for the LGBT community to rally around Alice and Gertrude. As you know, they didn’t always have it so easy, and they deserve all the support we can give them today.”

Interpretation of the site has developed in other unconventional ways. In Fall 2010, the Historic House Trust (a nonprofit partner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation that supports the preservation of twenty-three historic houses located in the city’s parks—including the Alice Austen House) published an issue of its quarterly newsletter based on the theme, “Owning History: Making room for controversy, opinion, rumor and conjecture.” In his opening note, the Historic House Trust’s Executive Director, Franklin D. Vagnone, questions “what things would be like if we as preservationists actually owned the rumors – imbedded the controversial and questionable into our tours and stories. . . Is it authentic to tell the whole story, or is it better to frame the story in a way that may exclude conjectural or controversial aspects?”

Demonstrating such potential ownership of controversy, the newsletter’s cover juxtaposes two images: one a tableau of a tennis party photographed by Alice Austen in 1886, the other a 2010 restaging photographed by Steven Rosen. Based on hints at “gender, class, and social standards” believed to have been choreographed into the original photograph by Alice, Rosen “magnifies these signs . . . to produce new images full of conjectures about interpersonal relationships in 2010.” Rosen’s cover photograph provides a much more overtly suggestive vision of the tennis party, including two same-sex couples kissing and

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27 Carl Rutberg, Email Interview, 29 April 2012.
29 Historic House Trust Newsletter (Fall 2010): 1.
embracing. (Fig. 4.) Inside the newsletter is a restaging of one of Alice’s images of herself and two friends dressed as men, alongside an article on “Alice Austen and Gertrude Tate: A ‘Boston Marriage’ on Staten Island.” The article—which begins with an introduction by Carl Rutberg—contrasts the “acknowledged history” of Alice’s life with her relationship with Gertrude, which “has generally been suppressed from history—not by Alice herself but by those who have wished to ‘save her reputation.’” Rosen’s photographs are a striking visual representation of this differentiation between acknowledged history and a contemporary reconsideration of heritage that accepts uncertainty and includes conjecture. According to Vagnone, “every bit of this newsletter was orchestrated because we knew what it needed to say in a way that people wouldn’t be so offended.” Despite this caution, which might indeed be necessary as preservationists attempt to incorporate LGBT issues into the field’s mainstream, the newsletter is an effective display of the reinterpretation needed at historic sites.

Offering an even more recent interpretation of Alice’s life, the musical If You Could See: The Alice Austen Story was produced by Sundog Theatre and performed on Staten Island and in Manhattan during November 2011. The Alice Austen House provided the photographs that were projected as scenery for the play, which was largely set at Clear Comfort, and Vagnone and Rutberg enthusiastically attended the Manhattan premiere. Alice’s relationship with Gertrude, from their meeting to their forced separation in old age and eventual reunion, featured prominently in the play. While their characters refer to each other as friend, the play clearly intimates romantic affection and shows them holding hands

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31 Franklin D. Vagnone, Phone Interview, 10 Dec. 2010.
and dancing at what is suggested to be an underground same-sex club. The summary advertising the play on theatre websites referred to Gertrude as “Alice’s life partner of fifty years.”32 In an interview with the Staten Island Advance, playwright Jeffrey Harper explained his approach to representing the relationship:

Q: Alice’s relationship with her longtime companion, Gertrude Tate, was an open secret and a private matter, by all accounts. How is it handled in the show?  
A: The documentary evidence says their relationship lasted 50 years, and that they lived together for 30, until they were separated several years before Alice’s death . . . It is not the purpose of “If You Could See” to sensationalize or offer a lurid presentation of what was, inarguably, a lifelong relationship of uncommon love, caring and devotion. Indeed, their relationship, though important in her life story, and reflected in a number of ways in certain photographs, is only one part of Alice’s story, only one part of “If You Could See.” Our approach is to portray, within the context of the historical period and available evidence, the depth of the relationship and its importance to both Alice and Gertrude.33

Harper’s emphasis on documentary evidence is shared by the house museum in terms of explaining its interpretation; given the visual nature of the play and the significant stage time given to Gertrude, however, If You Could See renders this evidence much more evocative than does the museum.

Of course, that Alice spent fifty years with Gertrude as her partner is not conjecture; what is up for debate, rather, is whether she would have identified as a lesbian, and whether the Alice Austen House should address her sexuality. Regardless of the label she might have preferred for herself, the fact that she has been called a “lesbian” and the

resulting controversy is now a part of her story. According to the house’s executive director, Carl Rutberg, “When we stopped debating the ‘L-word’ and started to talk about what we knew of Austen, the disagreements disappeared. Today, we do not claim that Austen was a lesbian, and we do not hide Gertrude Tate. Instead, we present what we know and let the visitors make up their own minds.” This honest conveying of the facts of Alice’s history is an improvement over hiding or denying Alice’s relationship as in the film played at the house, but does not tell the whole story of the house’s significance to LGBT heritage. Vagnone firmly believes that Alice’s sexuality is no longer “maliciously suppressed” as it most likely was in the museum’s earlier days. Instead, he attributes any reluctance to acknowledge assumptions made about her sexuality to a “fundamentally conservative view of scholarship deeply embedded into historic sites and historic house museums,” one that rejects conjecture and clings to verifiable truth. Acknowledging the role of educated conjecture—in the sense that LGBT history, more than other, mainstream histories, requires interpretation beyond documented fact—“would infuse our sites with a great deal more relevancy.”

Exemplifying the potential for museums to explore the capacity of interpretive language is a venture that took place in 2007 at Chicago’s Hull House. Jane Addams, who founded and lived in the settlement house, was born in 1860, only six years before Alice, and met her partner Mary Rozet Smith in 1890, nine years before Alice and Gertrude met. Like Alice and Gertrude, Mary and Alice had a decades-long partnership that itself is undeniable. Yet again as in the case of Alice and Gertrude, “There is no consensus among

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34 Rutberg 6.
35 Vagnone, Interview.
36 Vagnone, Interview.
scholars or family members about how to describe Rozet Smith and Addams’ relationship. Given the cultural and historical specificity of language, there are problems with appropriating current understandings of words such as ‘lesbian’ or ‘life-partner’ to a Victorian era relationship between women.”

For Lillian Faderman, “These two women obviously loved each other and had a deep emotional bond,” she says. "That’s a good enough definition of lesbian to me." Louise W. Knight, a biographer of Jane Addams, “doubts that Addams would meet a definition hinging on sex. But if your definition hinges on emotional attachment, then, yes, Addams was a lesbian.”

Lisa Lee, director of the Hull House Museum, goes further in challenging the vocabulary while at the same time accepting it; she told the Chicago Tribune, "Personally, I have no problem calling her a lesbian, but I would have to qualify that and say, ‘I don’t think she would identify as a lesbian in the way the word is used now.’ But because of her long relationships with initially [Hull House co-founder] Ellen Gates Starr, and with Mary, I would say that I think she was.”

Under Lee’s direction, the Hull House Museum took an innovative approach to not only address both the fact and conjecture surrounding Jane and Mary’s relationship, but also to actively engage visitors in considering the process of interpretation. The museum displayed three different labels for a portrait of Mary hanging in Jane’s bedroom, and invited visitors to share their responses at the museum and online. At the heart of the

39 Schoenberg.
project were questions of vocabulary: “What is at stake in how we describe their relationship? Who gets to decide?” The labels read as follows:

(A). Mary Rozet Smith, Alice Kellogg Tyler, 1898. Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams’s companion for decades and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. Alice Kellogg Tyler’s relationship with the Hull-House began in 1890. She taught, lectured, and exhibited here until her early death in 1900. A teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, Kellogg Tyler received many honors for her work.

(B). Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams’s life partner and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. Given the emotional intimacy that is expressed in their letters to one another, it is hypothesized that they were lesbians. It is, however, difficult to determine this for sure, particularly considering the differences in sexual attitudes of the Victorian era in which she lived and Jane Addams’s own complex reflections on the ideals of platonic love.

(C). Mary Rozet Smith was Jane Addams’s partner and one of the top financial supporters of Hull-House. They shared a deep emotional attachment and affection for one another. Only about one half of the first generation of college women ever married men. Many formed emotional, romantic, and practical attachments to other women. In letters, Addams refers to herself and Rozet Smith as “married” to each other. Hull-House women redefined domesticity in a variety of ways. Addams writes in another letter to Rozet Smith, “Dearest you have been so heavenly good to me all these weeks. I feel as if we had come into a healing domesticity which we never had before, as if it were the first affection had offered us.” Jane Addams burned many of her letters from Mary Rozet Smith.

These labels used different terms to describe the relationship—companion, life partner, lesbian, partner, married—and, in the cases of labels B and C, provided different explanations of the relationship’s context and different degrees of evidence as the basis of speculation. In contrast to the bare facts of Label A, Label B provides a modern understanding and mentions Jane and Mary’s letters; Label C explains the historical context.

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40 Lee 293.
41 Lee 293.
of their relationship, includes examples of the evidentiary letters, and mentions one reason for deficiencies in evidence. The variation among these labels highlights the capacity of language to influence interpretation and invites visitors to consider the act of curation behind the conveying of any history. This project demonstrates the possibility of presenting fact alongside fact-based conjecture in a way that further elucidates, rather than mythologizes, the artifact at hand. Not all of the many comments received were positive: “On the museum’s blog, someone claiming to be a relative of Addams remarked: ‘You should be keeping to the facts and not acting as potential gossip mongers.’” However, if all museums restricted themselves to presenting only documented fact and verifiable labels, the representation of LGBT heritage would be necessarily limited, and at best obfuscated by unaddressed insinuations and whispered speculation. Rather than presenting facts, the role of interpretation is to reveal meaning. The nature of sexuality’s vocabulary provides an opportunity for preservationists to expand the meaning and context of historic facts by addressing conjecture, discernible as such, as well as the reasons why uncertainties exist in transcribing sexual identity.

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II. Biographical Relevance  
Key Case Study: Steepletop  

Arguments against the inclusion of LGBT heritage in site interpretation often center on the topic of relevance. Separate from debate over language, morality, or evidence, the question arises of whether sexuality merits inclusion in the story of the person being told through a historic house. For practical purposes, the jurisdiction of final decision belongs to the interpreter: the writer of the exhibition panels and labels, or the tour guide. The life story can vary, too, based on the interlocutors: the visitors who receive the narrative, interact with the spaces and the guide, and generate the next degree of their own interpretations. Relevance should not be relative when it comes to the overall act of preservation; if sexuality played a role in a figure’s historically significant life or work, no single person or entity should aim to delete that sexuality from the general record under the excuse of editing. Yet biographical pertinence can fuel a debate that is perhaps most palpable at artists’ houses, where the interpretation of life and work can inform each other, but where the latter tends to bear much greater footing. Steepletop, the home of writer Edna St. Vincent Millay, presents a particular challenge in striking an interpretive balance between portraying the sexually liberated personage and the literary-canonized poet.  

Steepletop only opened to the public as a museum in 2010, and is in a process of determining how best to portray Millay, or "Vincent," as she preferred to be known. As her friend and reportedly first male lover Floyd Dell wrote in his autobiography, she was "a person of such many-sided charm."¹ She first gained publicity in 1912, at the age of

nineteen, with the publication of one of her most famous poems, *Renascence*, and by 1923 she had received the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry, which was fueled most often by her experiences with love. She married Eugen Boissevan in the same year, and they moved two years later to Austerlitz, New York, where they set up a home called Steepletop. (Fig. 5.) Her doting husband encouraged her writing career, and Vincent became one of the most widely read authors in America, capable of earning a living with this work even during the Great Depression. Thomas Hardy is often quoted as naming the skyscraper and Millay’s poetry as America’s greatest gifts to the 1920s. At the same time, she had gained repute for her radical independence and sexuality; she became a prominent figure in Greenwich Village while living there from 1917 to 1925, and had a number of bisexual affairs throughout the course of her open marriage. According to the Millay Society, charged with “preserving the legacy of a great American poet,” Vincent’s “work and life came to represent the modern, liberated woman of the Jazz age, free of the restrictions of the past.”

Still, somehow, she has become similarly dislodged from our present. After her death in 1950 from a perhaps alcohol-induced fall down the Steepletop stairs, Vincent experienced a tragically parallel fall from the heights of literary fame: “her star faded, a casualty of modernism . . . These days, her poetry is seldom taught in universities, and she is rarely the subject of critical essays. She is remembered mostly as a ‘woman poet’ who composed lilting, rhythmic, romantic verse and whose work, at best, is a kind of guilty pleasure, poetry that rhymes.” The preservation of Steepletop represents efforts to

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4 Smith.
readjust and revitalize that remembrance. Built in 1892, the same year as Vincent’s birth, the house was originally in a Victorian style, which Vincent simplified through the removal of ornamentation; she had the interiors remodeled, as well. The property passed to her sole heir, sister Norma Millay Ellis, and to the Millay Society at Norma’s death in 1986; Norma had helped establish the Society in 1978. The Society sold 250 acres of the Steepletop property to the state of New York in 2006, in order for it to join an adjacent forest preserve, and the $1.69 million received was put towards restoring Vincent’s farmhouse. According to Steepletop’s website, its mission is, “To illuminate the life and writings of Edna St. Vincent Millay and to preserve and interpret the character of Steepletop, her home and gardens, places where nature inspires the creative spirit.” In a review soon after it opened, Paul Grondahl of the Albany Times Union opined that the museum did in fact shed an all-embracing light on Vincent’s work, life, and death. Grondahl reported that the site’s executive director:

believes Millay’s death was accidental, but he doesn’t dodge the topic or any other regarding the outspoken, free-spirited woman decades ahead of her time in terms of sexual mores and women’s rights. Like her sexually charged poems, which frankly addressed serious subjects from first love to mortality, nothing is swept under the rug at Steepletop. For instance, the ninth spindle on the second-floor railing outside her bedroom remains askew and has never been repaired. “We think that’s the one she made a grab for before she fell down the stairs” . . . “This tour really shows the private Millay, which is quite rare in a house tour,” [he] said. “Our goal is to return the land and the house to her vision the best we can.”

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7 “About Us.”
Based on my own experience taking a public tour at Steepletop, I would argue that this display of “the private Millay,” while indeed evocative, owes more to the house’s preservation history than to the story told of Vincent.⁹

Although my tour guide was a full-time member of the professional staff, tours of Steepletop are also led by various volunteer docents, and it is important to note that having a live tour permits a more fluctuating interpretation than permanent labels, such as at the Alice Austen House. My guide spoke of Vincent’s marriage to Eugen as a prologue to his story of Steepletop; before we left the tour’s starting point to walk across the wooded property towards the house, he described the couple’s desire to establish a homestead as the context for their move to the relative isolation of Austerlitz. Upon entering the house, as if symbolically crossing the threshold into Vincent’s private realm, my guide introduced her as a “freewheeling sex goddess” who was the “queen of the property,” and recited First Fig, a celebration of liberation and her most famous poem: “My candle burns at both ends;/It will not last the night;/But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—/It gives a lovely light!” The guide interwove references to Vincent’s literary works and personal life, including her numerous extramarital trysts with men, into his explanation of the house’s spaces. Most notably, he explained that Vincent’s affair with George Dillon motivated her to ask Eugen to move out of their bedroom into an adjacent suite in 1928; the guide referred to this space, which is not currently open to the public, as the “Eugen suite.” As the Millay Society is in the process of raising funds to complete restoration of the first floor rooms, the tour was limited to the private rooms on the second story: Vincent’s bedroom, bathroom, study, and library. The guide presented the library as the heart of the house, where, along with her

extensive book collection, Vincent teasingly hung a sign reading “Silence!” and displayed three portraits of literary figures she admired, including one of Sappho, whom the guide identified as “the first female poet.” (Of course, the poet from the Greek isle of Lesbos is celebrated for her erotic poetry directed to both genders, and her name and birthplace yielded the words *Sapphic* and *lesbian*, which began to be used in the context of female homosexuality in the late nineteenth century.\(^{10}\))

More than Vincent’s life and work, the most striking story threaded through the tour was that of the preservation process itself. After Vincent’s death, her sister Norma intended to move into the house temporarily with her husband Harold, but lived there until her own death in 1986. With the intention of preserving the house as a museum, Norma did not disturb Vincent’s possessions, instead living among her sister’s spectral presence and keeping her own belongings separate. Visitors see the shoebox where Norma kept her things in the bedroom, and the bathtub rack where Norma’s own clothes still hang; Norma bathed instead in the Eugen suite, and Vincent’s closet remained intact until the Millay Society sorted its contents nine years ago. Like the majority of house museums, Steepletop’s attraction seems to lie in the chance to experience a sense of connection with the house’s former owner, communing with Vincent by occupying the private spaces she once inhabited. However, given the unusual means by which Norma ensured this opportunity, the Steepletop tour ultimately focused more on the house’s afterlife than Vincent’s; her place in the public memory is rendered physically concrete yet, in terms of biographical and literary significance, somewhat indeterminate.

Not once did my guide mention Vincent’s sexual interest in and involvement with women. When I inquired about this omission, after the tour had ended and the group dispersed, he replied, “Edna slept with anybody she loved. People ask, ‘Is that where she slept with so-and-so?’ We know she slept there. So probably anyone who slept with her did too.” He thus implied an emphasis on fact versus inference, yet a willingness to make informed generalizations and engage in visitor-initiated discussions. Openly referring in our private conversation to Vincent’s open marriage and numerous affairs with both men and women, he asserted that he is willing to discuss her sexuality when visitors specifically express interest. He explained that this practice stems from considering both the personal sensibilities of Steepletop’s volunteer staff members and those perceived of visitors to the site. Some of Steepletop’s docents are uncomfortable with referring to Vincent’s sexual exploits; one even refuses to tell the story of the “Eugen suite” and says instead that the dual bedroom arrangement is “European.” My guide told me that his personal approach is to adjust his interpretation based on his first impression of each tour group; he did not provide his rationale for gauging my group as amenable to the phrase “sex goddess” but not to Vincent’s bisexuality. He pointed out that some people visit the house viewing Vincent as a highly respected poet, with others thinking of her as a boisterous and free-spirited Greenwich Village figure. Confronting the considerable challenge to fulfill this duality of visitors’ preconceived notions, as well as to present a once world-famous and now little-known figure, Steepletop’s interpretive scheme has not yet managed to coalesce these facets of Vincent’s identity and yields to the more straightforwardly evocative preservation story.

The question of how best to characterize Vincent is one that biographers have also
faced in recent years. In 2001, the nearly simultaneous publication of two biographies brought renewed media attention to the poet; both books are featured on the list of resources on her life and work that the Millay Society recommends.¹¹ The biographies—Nancy Milford’s *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* and Jason Epstein’s *What My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*—coincided with a four-year period, beginning in September 1998, during which over 20,000 items related to the poet were acquired and transferred from the Millay Society’s storage to public availability at the Library of Congress. The acquisition included a number of materials, such as personal diaries, that had been left in deposit status upon Norma Ellis’ death.¹² Both Milford and Epstein used these materials as their primary sources, although unlike Epstein, Milford conducted much of her research over a twenty-year period of visits to Steepletop; her book includes vignettes about her own experience “engaging in a complicated dance of revelation and concealment with Norma.”¹³ Norma had considered writing a biography herself, and her cooperation lent Milford’s book a higher profile as the more official of the two biographies.¹⁴ At the same time, Epstein’s sensibilities as a poet himself produced what such reviewers as J. D. McClatchy, for *The New York Times*, see as a more refined understanding of Vincent’s work and its integration with the events of her life.¹⁵ Still, as Thomas Mallon points out in *The Atlantic,*

The first rule of modern literary biography is that the life renders the work incidental; Milford and Epstein rarely break that rule . . . Epstein says, ‘It is never wholly safe to deduce biography from poetry,’ but the days are long past when we even pretended to be operating in reverse, using the former to explain the latter . . . Approaching Millay’s life appears to be just as tricky as evaluating her poetry. Like Epstein, you can simply swallow hook, line and sinker the romantic legend of an irresistible goddess of both love and poetry . . . Milford, by contrast, seems to be straining against the Millay mythos . . .

Smith goes on to assert that, faced with this mythos, even Milford finds difficulty in framing the narrative of Vincent’s life: the same problem as with Steepletop’s interpretation. Although Milford reveals that her extensive resources were slightly limited by Norma’s censorship of sexual explicitness (she destroyed “an ivory dildo, a letter from a gay male spurning Millay’s advances, and a photograph of Millay and Bossevain in hardcore intimacy”17), both she and Epstein do discuss Vincent’s sexuality in far more overt terms than the house tour. Milford does not shy away from including Vincent’s relationships with women as a student at Vassar and her Greenwich Village trysts; Epstein introduces Vincent as “America’s foremost love poet, a poet of the erotic impulse and erotic condition . . . Millay’s lovers were flesh-and-blood men and women, and her sonnets preserve them in vivid detail.”18 In fact, several critics have remarked that Vincent’s love life receives extensive attention in both books, such that it perhaps eclipses the rest of her life story.19 This common focus in two recent biographies, written from different perspectives but both highly publicized and recommended by the Millay Society, would appear to counter the

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17 Kennedy.
19 See Miller, Kennedy, and Mallon.
argument that her unconventional sexuality is irrelevant to her place in history. By necessity, her personal significance extends to her house, preserved only because of its connection to—and now representation of—her life and work; her sexuality played an integral role in shaping both.

It is worth noting that Steepletop’s relationship to the LGBT community expands to an additional layer due to another former inhabitant, the poet Mary Oliver. Mary’s identity as a lesbian, while understated in her work and public image, is confirmed and widely known. As a young aspiring poet in 1953, Mary wrote to Norma to ask if she could visit the home of the late Vincent, whom she idolized. Norma’s consent resulted in a friendship between the two women. Mary lived at Steepletop off and on for seven years—including the period of her schooling at Vassar, Vincent’s alma mater—and helped Norma to organize her sister’s papers. Mary’s partner, Molly Mallone Cook, captured the Steepletop landscape in photographs that were included with Mary’s text in a book tellingly titled Our World. In an essay called “Steepletop,” featured in Oliver’s nonfiction collection Blue Pastures, she directly addressed her experience sorting through the stored papers and stories Norma shared with her. The essay is deeply revealing with regard to Vincent’s relationship with George Dillon, and to Norma’s approach to remembering her sister, including reluctance to reveal certain aspects of Vincent’s life:

There were, also, the less happy stories, involving illness, sex, weaknesses of various kinds, and, importantly, other people. Norma called them “secrets,” and she meant by that word, I believe, to convey a sense of intimacy with me (she was “giving” me these secrets) and, additionally, to control the

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information even after it was given (I was to hold on to these secrets but I was not to do anything with them). Each of these stories I was told in the deepest confidence. Each of these stories, I was made to understand, could hurt the reputation of the poet if known to the public, or hurt persons still living, or—and in some cases this seemed reasonable—the stories were too private, or inexplicable, or grievous, or silly, to be talked about . . . My job, primarily, was to listen and to remember.\textsuperscript{21}

Mary anticipated that a biography of Vincent, such as the works by Milford and Epstein, would emerge, and warned, “It will not be definitive. It will be valuable, and as truthful as it can be. We need to be each others’ storytellers . . . Still, it is like painting the sky. What stars have been left out, or their places mistaken, misinterpreted, not noticed at all?”\textsuperscript{22} Her point about the impossibility of conveying a comprehensive and unfiltered history applies equally to what is interpreted—and not interpreted—at Steepletop. Although the connection to Mary would likely be of interest to the type of literary-minded visitor that Steepletop draws, it is not merely downplayed at the site but rather completely neglected; she was not brought up during the tour, and her name does not even appear on the Millay Society website. When I asked my guide about Mary’s involvement in the property’s history, he minimized the association; Mary is featured in the grounds’ “Poetry Path,” he said, and she had spent some time at Steepletop, but he was “not sure where she lived” while there. He noted that Mary first met Molly during a visit to Steepletop, and implied that this relationship led Norma to eventually cut off contact with her; he did not elaborate, although Mary makes a similar intimation in her essay.\textsuperscript{23} Particularly given the attention paid at the house to the story of its preservation, it is surprising that Mary Oliver’s involvement receives no mention. Her time at Steepletop is a part of both the LGBT and

\textsuperscript{22} Oliver 87.
\textsuperscript{23} Oliver 84-85.
literary legacies of the property that is forsaken in the wake of the struggle to define Vincent.

In a broad sense, non-heterosexuality’s relevance to a historic figure’s life could be questioned—and confirmed—at any site linked to the LGBT community. At Clear Comfort, Alice Austen’s apparent lesbianism does, in fact, have relevance: Alice shared the house with Gertrude; their relationship is a reflection of Alice’s unwillingness to conform to societal constraints that is otherwise celebrated at the museum; her challenge to gender stereotypes is notably captured in her photography; and then there is the simple fact that queerness—just as any element of a person’s identity—affects one’s view of world. A similar debate has taken place at Hull House; some scholars have expressed concern that conjectural description of Jane Addams’ love life would obscure the solid facts of her career. Others, however, have asserted otherwise: "[Jane Addams] could not have done what she did without Mary Rozet Smith. Period. No way."24 Addams biographer Louise W. Knight has said, "It's too central to anyone's life to make a primary/ emotional /commitment /lifetime partnership to say that we shouldn't be interested in it."25 A life can only be told through interpretation, by curating details, shaping a narrative that corresponds with facts and materials, but however a house museum decides to characterize its main inhabitant, interpreters are entrusted by that person’s legacy and by the public to tell the story as accurately as possible. As Steepletop gains establishment as a museum, it should ensure that the entire truth of Vincent’s sexuality recovers a place in her story.


25 Schoenberg.
III. Site Relevance
Key Case Study: Walt Whitman Birthplace

The question of sexuality’s relevance can target not only a person’s biographical significance but also the significance of the historic site itself. It is conceivable that a historic figure’s sexuality would not find an appropriate interpretive application within a site’s context. Heated debate over this topic has occurred at the Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center, where investigation has unearthed a buried story of preservation’s recent past. As with Edna St. Vincent Millay, the multiple aspects of Walt Whitman’s personage could yield discussion of whether sexuality should have bearing on the interpreted portrayal of him from a biographical standpoint; the poet himself said, in *Song of Myself*, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself, (I am large -- I contain multitudes.)”¹ However, given that the LGBT community’s embracement of Walt and his work is much better established, it is more fruitful to consider challenges made to his sexuality’s site-based relevance, in terms of both the Birthplace’s significance and its audience.

As David S. Reynolds wrote in his 2005 biography of Walt Whitman, “Championing himself as the ‘bard’ of American democracy, he represented in his writing the total range of experience. He was the first poet to treat sex candidly and to explore same-sex love with subtlety.”² Among scholars, it is nearly unanimously agreed upon that Walt’s most intimate—and, indeed, romantic—relationships were with men. Reynolds notes that, although he “appeared to have had a brief affair with a woman. . . his journals are full of

brief descriptions of men he had met and befriended.” Walt’s correspondences appear to confirm his relationships with men including Henry Stafford and, most notably, Peter Doyle. The primary source of speculation that Walt might not have been purely homosexual is a letter to John Addington Symonds, an English poet, literary critic, and early advocate of homosexual liberation. Symonds began a correspondence with Walt after reading *Leaves of Grass* and questioned Walt about the homosexuality of his poetry; in a reply written in 1890, Walt disavowed homosexuality and wrote, “Tho’ always unmarried, I have six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes to me occasionally. . .” Like any historic text, especially written by so verbally creative a person as Walt, this assertion is subject to the interpretation of readers and academics, many of whom do not believe that Walt’s statement was factual:

> Whitman’s fantastic paternal claim has since been the source of many a wild goose chase on the part of Whitman biographers intent on proving the poet’s heterosexuality . . . Critics who acknowledge Whitman’s homosexual leanings have also given this letter much thought, offering a range of reasons for its tone and exaggeration, from Whitman’s concern about his public image and literary reputation to his hostility to Symonds’s rigid conception of sexuality. 

Scholars have otherwise dismissed Whitman’s reply as “an outrageously unconvincing story.” The work that prompted Symonds’ inquiry, known as the “Calamus cluster,” is a series of poems in the 1860 edition of Walt’s seminal book *Leaves of Grass* that celebrate love between men. For example, “When I Heard at the Close of Day” includes the following

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3 Reynolds 15.
lines: “For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,/In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,/And his arm lay lightly around my breast - and that night I was happy.”7 At the time of publication, the poems were not renounced by “exacting, puritanical readers” who objected to other sexual explicitness in his work, because “same-sex love was not interpreted the same way then as it is now. Passionate intimacy between people of the same sex was common in pre-Civil War America. The lack of clear sexual categories (homo-, hetero-, bi-) made same-sex affection unself-conscious and widespread.”8 Although Walt “was also inventing a language of homosexuality, and the Calamus poems became very influential poems in the development of gay literature,” they were not interpreted as describing homosexuality until categories of sexual identity began to solidify at the end of the nineteenth century.9

Although Walt spent only the first four years of his life (1819-1823) in his parents’ wood-frame, Federal-style house on Long Island, the Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site has become a localized representation of Walt’s overall legacy. (Fig. 6.) The Walt Whitman Birthplace Association managed the site with limited visitation until 1986, when a new Executive Director, Barbara Bart, convinced the Board to open the house to increased public accessibility and educational programming. Since 1987, the annual visitation has grown from 1,000 to 16,500 people, almost one third of whom are students from grades three through twelve.10 According to the National Register nomination, the house is “architecturally significant as an intact, representative example of early nineteenth century

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7 Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1897):103.
8 Reynolds 118.
10 “About WWBA,” Walt Whitman Birthplace and Interpretive Center <http://www.waltwhitman.org/about>.
settlement period architecture in the town of Huntington,” and historically significant as the birthplace of Walt Whitman, “one of America’s greatest poets.”¹¹ Despite his brief and early stay at the house, Walt “formed a deep attachment to the area and used it as a source of inspiration for many of his greatest poems.”¹² The tour of the house itself hardly mentions Walt, instead focusing on how the spaces and furnishings functioned and providing a sense of what life was like in an early nineteenth century farmhouse. In contrast, the adjacent Interpretive Center, which opened in 1997, includes classrooms, a library, office space, and most importantly an exhibit hall. The permanent exhibit, conceived as a “reverse timeline” composed of themed panels, provides the background of Walt’s life and legacy that is, perhaps appropriately, left out of interpreting the house of his earliest childhood. The site’s brochure advertises that, “Visitors can delve deeply into Whitman’s life and poetry through a series of engaging exhibits that trace the poet’s development from his boyhood on Long Island to his international prominence as one of our country’s greatest visionaries,” and its mission statement reads, “Our programs and exhibits educate the public on Whitman’s life and times, explore his contribution to our nation’s rich cultural heritage, and inspire young poets and writers.”¹³

The question of whether Walt’s non-heterosexuality is relevant to a site where he was surely unaware of this element of his identity, and where today the interpretive emphasis is on his poetry and the audience largely schoolchildren, is worth raising (and has, in fact, been raised). A scholarly article from 1988 notes, “The Walt Whitman

¹¹ National Register Nomination, 3.
¹³ Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center brochure.
Birthplace Museum sidesteps the issue of Whitman’s homosexuality.”14 Today, his sexuality is not so much sidestepped as meticulously understated. The National Register nomination notes only that *Leaves of Grass* “was a failure with the public due to its prophetic and, often times, sexual nature;” and the Birthplace’s website and introductory video do not mention sexuality at all, either in terms of Walt’s life or work.15 The collection of portraits on one wall of the exhibit hall include photographs of Walt with other men, including Peter Doyle, but the captions bear no intimation of homosexuality. (Fig. 7.) The reverse timeline does, however, present one panel titled “To celebrate the need of comrades” that presents photos of Walt with Peter, at his friend Mrs. Gilchrist’s tea table with other women present, and insets of Horace Traubel and another male friend. (Fig. 8.) The lead text reads as follows:

Defying society’s suppression of human sexuality, Whitman wrote sensitively in his verse about all types of relationships, and encouraged people to rejoice in their capacity for love. Most of Whitman’s poems about physical love appear in two groups of poems created for the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In "Calamus" he celebrated loving bonds between men, while in "Children of Adam" he wrote about the union of men and women. In later years, it was "Children of Adam" that caught the attention of censors. Whitman, who never married, felt a need to present himself and his work in a more generally acceptable light as the years passed. He promoted for public consumption and for posterity a presumed heterosexuality as an element of the "Whitman myth" - the image of a poet laureate of and for all Americans.

A sidebar beneath this text and alongside the photographs bears the heading “Friendships:”

Whitman’s open and loving nature, as expressed both in his personal life and his poetry, drew firm and faithful friends to him. His closest female friends were intelligent, independent women who valued his ability to treat them as equals. . . .

In the winter of 1865, Whitman became acquainted with Peter

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Doyle in Washington. "From that time on we were the biggest sort of friends," Doyle later recalled. For the next eight years the two saw each other almost daily. Though this relationship brought Whitman much joy, it was not always perfect. Doyle often sank into mental depressions, which Whitman worked ardentely to dispel. In 1873, the two were permanently separated when a stroke forced Whitman to move to his brother George’s house in Camden, New Jersey.

I was pleased with this allusion to Whitman’s homosexual relationships, and I continue to give the Birthplace credit for acknowledging that Walt’s heterosexuality is only “presumed” and for discussing his relationship with Peter; I give more credit for their willingness to discuss the museum’s past and their current interpretive stance. According to Executive Director Cynthia Shor, “We look at Whitman’s life, his poetry, his legacy, and his role in poetry... We don’t particularly discuss his sexuality unless it’s brought up by visitors.” In that case, she said that guides, while not prevented from elaborating, are told to use Whitman’s words—“I love men as I love women; I love women as I love men”—without annotation, so as to emphasize documentary evidence as opposed to conjecture.16 This approach is admirable in its dependence on evidence (although I am unable to locate the source of this quotation); however, it is incomplete. As at other sites, the tendency to provide only “fact” and let visitors interpret for themselves undermines the interpretive responsibility of the museum. Even quoting from Whitman is an act of curating, a selection of which quotation to provide that reveals the intention and viewpoint of the museum interpreter; in this case, the chosen line deemphasizes homosexuality, whereas other lines—from Walt’s Calamus poems, perhaps, or his correspondence with Peter Doyle—would suggest otherwise.

When the Interpretive Center opened in 1997, the *Whitman Quarterly Review* reported, “The opening ceremonies were briefly interrupted by members of a gay activist group called the Calamus Preservation Society, who threw blackboard erasers to protest what the group claimed was the ‘erasure’ of Whitman’s homosexuality from the opening exhibit.”\(^\text{17}\) The *Long Island Voice*, a spin-off of the *Village Voice* that existed only from 1997 to 2000, published an article about the controversy, criticizing the Birthplace exhibit: "the curators. . . reconstruct a marketable mainstream identity for Long Island's laureate." Two letters to the editor were subsequently published. Tom Casey, president of the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, responded that the Birthplace provided “a fair and balanced representation of the life of this greatest American poet,” and argued that there was no need “to make statements about Whitman's sexual tendencies in neon lights.” In a letter two weeks later, Arnie Kantrowitz, a well-known gay activist and writer, denounced Casey's "shrink-wrapped version of Whitman" that "does dishonor to the poet's true self."\(^\text{18}\) Other than these obscure references, documented in the online Walt Whitman Archive run by Whitman scholars at the University of Iowa and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the story seems to have disappeared.

The circumstances underlying this protest were more complex than these references suggest. The original panel is dominated by the photo of Walt and Peter Doyle, which is now included on the actual panel in miniature, and also includes a smaller photo of Henry Stafford. (Fig. 9.) The text begins with a quotation from Whitman’s poetry: “I am he

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that aches with amorous love/ Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter,/aching, attract all matter?/So the body of me to all I meet or know.” The panel goes on to discuss Walt’s “open embrace of the human body and sexual love,” which was “shocking to mainstream nineteenth century America” (and, evidently, continues to be); it includes that “Most of Whitman's poems about sex and the body appear in two groups of poems. . . In ‘Calamus,’ he celebrated love and intimacy between men, while in ‘Children of Adam’ he wrote about the sexual union of men and women. Surprisingly, it was ‘Children of Adam’ that caught the attention of the censors.’ The most prominent alterations in the exhibited text are that “love and intimacy” has been changed to “loving bonds,” “sexual union” to “union,” and the editorial element of surprise that Walt’s heterosexual, rather than homosexual, poems were censored, has been eliminated; that he wrote homosexual poetry at all is now referenced only vaguely. As a young employee of Ralph Appelbaum Associates, Sally Eberhardt wrote the text for the Birthplace’s reverse timeline over the course of two years of development with the firm, for whom this was a very small-budget project. Joann Krieg, a Whitman scholar on the Birthplace’s Board who was also the academic adviser to the project, signed off on Eberhardt’s copy.

Thinking that her involvement was over and that the exhibit would move into the fabrication phase, Eberhardt was surprised to learn that three board members were displeased with the way the “Whitman and Love” panel had been presented. This was “infuriating” given the fact that, as stipulated by the predetermined setup, the academic had approved the text, but “three months later that sign-off meant absolutely nothing.” Included as objects of the board members’ opposition were excerpts from letters between Walt and Peter Doyle, and Eberhardt found it particularly shocking that Whitman’s own
words were being censored. In hindsight, this is ironic, given the current tendency at the museum to quote Whitman and indicate reliance on his words alone in response to questions about sexuality. Particularly because of the nature of Walt’s writing and its connection to his personal life and emotional grounding, Eberhardt said, “My original feeling was. . . anyone who has a problem with Whitman and love shouldn’t be on the Board.” One of the primary concerns of the objectors, as Eberhardt recalled, was the anticipated negative reaction of Catholic schoolteachers visiting the site with their students. Eberhardt did not understand why this sector of society was receiving preference over members of the gay community—who were also New York taxpayers—who “have a right to their own history.”

The process of editing the text persisted from June to December of 1996. Of the three sections of the text, originally identified as “Unique Outlook,” “Peter Doyle,” and “Friendships,” the most telling metamorphosis was that of the section about Peter.

Eberhardt’s original text, dated June 20, 1996, read as follows:

In late 1865, while traveling home on a Washington streetcar, Whitman sat down next to the car’s young conductor, Peter Doyle. “We were familiar at once,” Doyle later recalled, “I put my hand on his knee—we understood. . . From that time on we were the biggest sort of friends.” So began the longest romantic relationship of Whitman’s life. For the next eight years, Whitman and Doyle saw each other almost daily. Often, Whitman would send bouquets and loving notes to Doyle. In one of his early letters, Whitman wrote warm words to his “dearest comrade”: “. . . here is a kiss for you, dear boy—on the paper here—a good long one. . . I will imagine you with your arm around my neck saying Goodnight, Walt — & me—Good night, Pete.” Though this relationship brought Whitman much joy, it was not always perfect. Pete often sank into mental depressions that Whitman would work ardently to dispel. In

It seems worth noting that Whitman himself “accepted all religions but believed in no single church.” Reynolds 77.
1873, the two were permanently separated when a stroke forced Whitman to move to his brother George’s house in Camden, New Jersey. Whitman would go on to have intimate bonds with other men, but none equaled the loving companionship he had with Peter Doyle. (198)

On November 6, Eberhardt received a letter from Joann Krieg reading, “After much reflection, I have decided to alter the text in question. Can this be done at this stage? I’m afraid it must be. Please consider the attached text carefully, offering revisions that do not change it substantively.” The line, “I put my hand on his knee—we understood. . .” had been removed, as had the line, “So began the longest romantic relationship of Whitman’s life.” Krieg had made a number of other alterations that Eberhardt revised—removing such lines as “So began a friendship that lasted many years” and “In letters, Whitman spoke in warmest terms to Doyle, addressing him as ‘dear boy’ and ‘son’”—and sent back on November 8. On November 11, Krieg again signed off on this new version; still, under pressure from the Board of the Birthplace, the editing continued. By December 2, the section on friendship had been placed before the section on Peter, deemphasizing his importance, and the quotation from Walt’s letter to Peter had been deleted. The December 3 version saw the final erasure of any intimation of homosexuality: the line, “Often, Whitman would send bouquets and loving notes to Doyle,” was cut, and the last line, which had already been softened to, “Whitman later formed close attachments to other men, but none equaled the loving companionship he had with Peter Doyle,” was ultimately flattened to, “Whitman later formed other friendships but none equaled his relationship with Peter

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20 Sally Eberhardt, Email Interview, 29 April 2012.
On December 6, Krieg sent Eberhardt a memo indicating her third and final sign-off on the text, as well as the type of facts that she would not object to including:

I’m ready to sign-off on the T2 panel text as we have it, with the two changes I indicated to you by phone the last time we spoke [referenced in my own text above]. . . You were distressed at the brevity of text on this tertiary panel, so you might want to consider adding something from among the following facts. PD [Peter Doyle] left his job as a streetcar conductor in 1872 and went to work on the Penn. RR (which may have meant that he and WW [Walt Whitman] did not see each other on an almost daily basis for 8 years but rather for 7); PD was one of three people who tended WW on a rotating basis in the first months after he had his major stroke in 1873; even after they were separated the two continued to communicate by letters and post cards until 1876, and saw each other a few times between then and WW’s death.

During the process of editing the text, Eberhardt was “becoming incredibly uncomfortable on a moral level with the way things were going down. . . When push came to shove, my last ditch attempt to try to save the situation was to try to get the New York Parks Department to intervene . . . I felt like they had a historic obligation [and said,] I think we're clouding over a history that doesn't deserve to be clouded over.” This clouding over, said Eberhardt, included trying to promote that Walt liked women romantically as well as men, which she perceived as disingenuous given the fact that “the deep emotional attachments in his life were to men. He's cryptic in a lot of his poetry, but in his private writing to Peter he expressed strong sentiments.” Ultimately, however, the panel was changed, and under pressure from Birthplace administrators as the clients, Eberhardt’s employer laid her off after she contacted Parks. She was pleased that a protest occurred at the Birthplace, but she never visited the exhibit due to the negativity of the experience:

22 Memo from Joann Krieg to Sally Eberhardt, 6 December 1996, Papers of Sally Eberhardt.
As you might imagine, the whole history of what happened was very sad for me – more so on the larger scale of what I saw as an injustice done to our history than on the personal scale of losing my job at the time. At the time, it made me very sad to see where our country - indeed even places like the Walt Whitman Birthplace (just 80 miles outside of NYC and the cutting-edge firm of Ralph Appelbaum in lower Manhattan - was at the time. I like to think the same story could not happen today in 2012. But who knows.23

Eberhardt left the museum field and believed that her role in the Birthplace debate had been “buried in the pile of history,” but she said that sharing her experience “has made me feel a great sense of hope – that after sixteen years now, the story can be brought out and maybe a wider group of people—academics, designers, the general public—can learn something from what, for me, remains a very sad chapter in our national preservation and memory.”24

Jean-Ulrick Désert, a visual artist and former exhibition designer with Ralph Appelbaum Associates, became involved with the project rather late in the process, after the debate regarding the “Love panel” was already underway. He recalled the dramatic proceedings, including Eberhardt’s forced departure: “It’s enough that Walt Whitman was being victimized; we didn’t need a contemporary victim as well. . . It was a bit of an odd fight, which I would say, generally speaking, we lost.” The suppression of Walt’s sexuality, he said, “wasn’t from our end at all, because we would have wanted everything to be very out-there and truthful essentially, but as an exhibition design firm we were not supposed to get involved in the content.” In fact, Appelbaum had a reputation for being a culturally sensitive firm, having previously designed for such notable clients as the Holocaust Museum. When the Birthplace exhibition opened, Ralph Appelbaum told The New York

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23 Sally Eberhardt, Phone Interview, 15 March 2012.
24 Sally Eberhardt, Email Interview, 12 March 2012.
“Whitman dreamed of an American culture unburdened by the restrictions of class, color and gender. We are just seeing the beginning of such fundamental cultural change, and that’s why the timing of this opening is so important.”

Still, such cultural change did not guide the final exhibition, and this approach was particularly challenging for Désert as a gay man. “I remember [Eberhardt] was happy that I came on board,” he said, “because I think it seemed to be a popular thing that at least one gay man was involved in the project.” Still, he was disappointed that “nothing about the design was in any way queer.” He explained that, “queering it would be to change the scale relationships of some of the images and changing the labels. There are techniques that allow for subtexts to arise... and make a difference between really burying something versus letting it be transparent. And I think at a certain point it’s important that LGBT people might already be clued into that type of double-speak, so at least it speaks to that young person” who is gay and visiting the museum. But ultimately with the final revisions, he said, “I think this particular panel was rather absurd in terms of the way in which it tried to talk around something... there should really be an erratum done just for that one panel. There was no doubt this was a rather out gay man in a moment where, yes, it’s true, there was insufficient language to articulate what was going on in terms of identity.” Désert explained that the firm felt obligated to accommodate the Birthplace administration, their client, and that the firm’s “calculus” involved “the possibility of a lawsuit if we had walked away” from the project.

Curator Richard Ryan, who participated in the meetings at the Birthplace to review Appelbaum’s submitted exhibit text, recalled that the Board had unanimously agreed to

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26 Jean-Ulrick Désert, Phone Interview, 29 April 2012.
change the “love panel”: “At that time, the Association did not wish to preach or prove Walt Whitman’s sexual orientation. We still glorify the man and his works, and his works reveal his sexual preferences. . . Whitman’s loving relationship with Doyle was supplemented with facts from other relationships he had during his lifetime.”

Archived correspondence supplements Eberhardt’s, Désert’s, and Ryan’s recollections of the turn of events. In suggestions for changes to the reverse timeline submitted to Appelbaum, the Birthplace caretakers carefully suggested that the panel’s “objectives. . . might be adjusted.” In particular, the inclusion of photos of Whitman with Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford “overemphasises a personal homosexuality.” The document states:

**Historic Reasons for the Changes:** We think Whitman who was a dignified person would object to the above portrayed. His personal life should be treated apart from his poetry. . . He should not be looked upon in this exhibit as a homosexual poet; however, the homosexuality in his poetry can be acknowledged. We also think that the concept of ‘amativeness’ or the admiration of or coveting of beauty should be emphased [sic] along with heterosexual love themes here. The following quotes illustrate ‘amativeness’ . . . We also recommend using *A Woman Waits for Me.*

**Political Reasons for the Changes:** The abovementioned facets of Whitman are of great interest to intellectuals, poets, and historians. However, most of our audience will be schoolchildren whose parents might be upset at the portrayal of Walt Whitman as a homosexual. The present political administration, which has paid for the exhibit, might not approve of this treatment of the poet especially if it becomes a point of interest for gay activists. Whitman did have women friends such as Mrs. Gilchrist and Mrs. Ferne. Perhaps photos of these persons might be included.

It is especially revealing about the nature of this objection that “historic reasons” would include assumption—based only on the historic evidence that Walt was a “dignified

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27 Richard Ryan, Email Interview, 29 Feb. 2012.
28 Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center.
person”—about Walt’s own view of the exhibit. The statement that “his personal life should be treated apart from his poetry” is equally quizzical in terms of explaining the exclusion of his sexuality, as the entire exhibit examines Walt’s career in the context of his personal life, and the women whose photos might be added (to appeal to politicians and parents) were also part of his personal life, not his poetry. A letter sent to scholar Joann Krieg and executive director Barbara Bart from a member of the Board’s Program Committee demonstrates the thinking that lead to these suggestions:

... [we] had strong feelings against the panel representing Whitman’s homoerotic attachments. I recall an earlier expression of this concern: how to exhibit Whitman’s life and work and not jeopardize the Association’s ability to carry out its larger responsibilities. The panel in question, as it exists, makes prominent one type of love (which no doubt was Whitman’s preference) but does not provide, as his poetry provides in far greater measure, his expressions of many kinds of love. Moreover, ‘The Love of Comrades’ is given importance equal to the themes of the other (seven?) panels. This is a value judgement, an interpretative judgement, the Association is making—a message it is sending to exhibit viewers. Speaking more practically, I am convinced that the present panel will be attacked—by teachers, parents, politicians wanting to complain about how tax money is being spent, religious conservatives, reporters, whomever; with the result that we will have to stand our ground and keep the panel or pay the added cost of changing it. In any event, there will be a cost... I don’t think the trustees should be subject to the surprise of a controversy.”

A letter from Krieg to Bart expresses similar anxiety about the potential for controversy: “I asked to have Harry Stafford dropped from the ‘love’ panel because I think Pete and WW are enough without adding to the fire.” At the same time, in another letter, she writes of concern that the panel “avoid the appearance of censorship by the State,” and clarifies that,

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29 Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center, 6 Nov. 1996.
30 Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center, undated.
“WW can still be a good American even if he is gay. Perhaps the kiddies need to learn this, even if their parents—and teachers—haven’t.”\textsuperscript{31} Still, the changes were ultimately made, and the Board expressed satisfaction with the direction of the editing. A letter of November 29 from the Board to Kreig read,

\begin{quote}
The exhibit text as now edited is straightforward [sic] in educating the public who Walt Whitman was, including his sexuality in writing and in life style. Confrontation is not what we want people to experience. But confrontation can be the effect of specific references to sexuality – whatever gender is involved. That is why we have recommended removing text like Whitman’s specific bodily references in his letters to Peter Doyle. The text is factual about Whitman’s sexuality. It retains a paragraph about Peter Doyle. It ends with the fact that Whitman sent loving letters and bouquets to Doyle. Now the homosexuality is balanced with information about the heterosexuality. For example, the exhibit text cites “Calamus” as being poems about men loving men and “Children of Adam” about men and women loving each other. The quote used from “I Sing the Body Electric” puts the sexuality in balance. That is why we recommend changing the heading to this poem’s title. It is also why we recommend that the Peter Doyle picture be retained, but in a size that balances with the pictures of women. We then will have a balanced, honest presentation about Whitman’s sexuality.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Ralph Appelbaum Associates submitted the final text to the Birthplace (excluding the reference to the “loving letters and bouquets” cited above), and the accompanying correspondence included the following:

\begin{quote}
Attached is the WW ‘I am he that aches. . . ’ secondary and tertiary panel script from the summer of 1996. This was later revised to ‘To celebrate the need of comrades’ and reflected in the graphic distribution on our meeting of October 1, 1996. Once again the approved signed off script should currently be in your files and records, it has softened the language considerably and will hopefully shelter the WWBA from future critiques of any conspicuous omissions on Whitman’s personal
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center, undated.
\textsuperscript{32} Letter to Joann Krieg, 29 Nov. 1996, Papers of Sally Eberhardt.
life. As you requested this particular note and attachment has not been carbon copied to anyone other than you at WWBA.\textsuperscript{33} Another letter from Ralph Appelbaum Associates to Bart referred to the new text “that softens Walt Whitman’s sexuality while keeping the integrity of Walt Whitman’s own words.”\textsuperscript{34} Whether that integrity was in fact kept, however, with no “conspicuous omissions” made, remained a matter of debate.

According to Ryan, the revision of the “love panel” was “leaked to the gay press,” and activists got wind of what they viewed as a cover-up of Whitman’s identity. David Robinson was one of those activists. At the time, he was a graduate student for English literature and was studying and writing about “same-sex related writing, what we would today called gay and lesbian, from mostly the early modern period. So while I wasn’t studying Whitman per se, I was reading all the debates about his sexuality.” He joined Arnie Kantrowitz, who had been heavily involved in LGBT activism since the early 1970s, Richard Fumosa, an editor at Basic Books who focused on gay literature, and Stephen Shapiro, another scholar of English literature, in planning a protest at the Birthplace: “I think the four of us brought a combination of scholarly and academic knowledge—Arnie, Stephen, and myself—and the real world literature and publishing involved in actually spreading literature and criticism—Richard—and then we all had activism.” (Fig. 10.) Robinson views this crossover of academia and activism as stemming from the increased LGBT scholarship and AIDS activism of the late 1980s and into the 1990s.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, Robinson and Shapiro knew each other from their involvement in ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power): “David must have known I was interested in an action like this,” said Shapiro, “since I was the one who

\textsuperscript{33} Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center, 26 Nov. 1996.
\textsuperscript{34} Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center, undated.
\textsuperscript{35} David Robinson, Phone Interview, 30 March 2012.
negotiated the acquisition of the ACT UP/NY archives for the New York Public Library, and I think at that point he discovered I was a grad student in Yale’s English department.”

Together the four men formed the ad hoc Calamus Preservation Society, named after Walt’s most homoerotic poems, and planned an ACT UP-style “zap” at the Birthplace. According to Shapiro, “I don’t believe we made any effort to speak with Joann Krieg or the museum (and this sort of broke the usual ACT UP modus operandi of trying to negotiate before a zap).”

As Robinson recalls, their view of the exhibit was that it was “actually very sophisticated in its heterosexism. It managed to allude just enough that you couldn’t accuse them of absolutely ignoring Whitman’s relationships with men, but then crafting it in such a way... that you could guess his sexuality [but] if you didn’t already know something about Whitman’s life, you would never pick it up from the exhibit.” The three Society members drove up together to the Birthplace from Manhattan on the day of the Interpretive Center’s opening ceremony, attended by nearly 800 people, including local politicians, Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet Galway Kinnell, and local students.

Once there, “Arnie took the microphone and briefly (before being escorted out) spoke about the Center’s misinformation.” As reported, they did throw erasers (“‘tossing’ would be more accurate,” said Robinson) and handed out flyers, “but the main part was interrupting and challenging.” Robinson noted that there was no arrest. They did not receive a response

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36 Stephen Shapiro, Email Interview, 28 April 2012.
37 Stephen Shapiro, Email Interview, 28 March 2012.
38 David Robinson, Phone Interview.
from the Birthplace to their demand that the exhibit be changed to more honestly reflect Walt’s life.41

In his letter of August 8, 1997, to the Birthplace administration on behalf of the Calamus Preservation Society, Robinson insisted that the installation be changed and that a committee of Lesbian and Gay Studies scholars be formed to draft the revisions:

Your installation employs censorship, misrepresentation, minimization, and evasion... Instead of disseminating the truth about Whitman’s life and work, the Association panders to conservative prejudice, and in seeking to avoid controversy, you have created it... There is no division about Whitman’s sensibility, only about whether he sexually acted upon it.42 Rectifying your museum’s omissions and distortions is not a favor to gay people in search of a culture hero. It is a corrective to scholarship that has been perversely bent in service to something other than the truth. The issue is not an idle question or a superficial matter of labels. Without understanding Whitman’s special love of men, it is impossible to understand the source of the spiritual bonds that he envisioned as the cement of his ideal democracy. The Walt Whitman Birthplace Association claims to celebrate this democratic ideal; instead, you betray it... Ralph Appelbaum said to a Newsday reporter, ‘We don’t dwell on the fact that he was a homosexual, but it’s well known. If you want to know more, you can pick up a book in the museum shop and read about his life. We think we were sensitive, but proper.’ This statement marks the first time we’ve ever heard of a museum leaving something important out because it’s well-known. You don’t leave out the fact that Whitman was a poet... Everyone who visits this New York State-funded educational center, especially schoolchildren, deserves to know the full truth about America’s most famous poet, not the cynical version you supply.43

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41 David Robinson, Phone Interview.
42 In the margins of this letter, alongside the line about Whitman’s “sensibility,” a member of the Birthplace staff wrote, “If this word sensibility means his sexual orientation, there is division of opinion. We have for example his letter to Symonds claiming he fathered six children. Possibly, he had relationships with more than six women to have fathered only six.”
43 Letter from David Robinson, 8 Aug. 1997, Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center.
The version of this argument that was distributed via the Society’s flyers at the demonstration is even more pointed in its criticism. Under the headline, “Stop Erasing American History!! Don’t let your tax money pay for lies! The Walt Whitman Birthplace has censored the truth,” the flyer reads:

If we want to appreciate him, we must begin with the naked truth, not with a puritanical figleaf. With its lie of omission about Whitman’s homosexuality, The Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, with the approval of Governor Pataki’s administration, is creating a false portrait of America’s greatest poet. There is no honest way to deny that Whitman was a man who loved men. . . . Not to discuss this is to create disinformation, a campaign of falsification to serve a right-wing political agenda. Biased scholars have misrepresented the evidence they found or purposefully distorted their reporting. . . . How would you feel if no one mentioned that Walt was an American because his poetry belongs to the world? It’s time to tell the truth. Walt Whitman was gay.44

Attached to the flyer, as evidence for the Society’s claims about Walt, are three and a half pages of quotations from Walt’s poetry and letters (“Let Walt Whitman’s Words Speak for Themselves”) and half a page of selections from letters to Walt (“And In The Words Of Those Close To Walt Whitman”), including from Harry Stafford and Peter Doyle.

Because the goal of the Society’s efforts was to provoke a change in the text of the “Love panel,” Shapiro said that he does not consider their campaign to have been successful. He explained that the debate was not a matter of the biographical relevance of Walt’s non-heterosexuality, which was already widely accepted as fact and otherwise recognized as possibility: “It wasn’t even a matter of getting this in the public’s mind. I remember someone telling us that even “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman” [a popular television

44 Walt Whitman Birthplace Archives.
show] had an episode on Whitman’s sexuality.”\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, Ralph Appelbaum had suggested to \textit{Newsday} that, because “the fact that he was a homosexual [is] well-known,” it did not need to be included in the exhibit.\textsuperscript{46} (It is interesting to note that he refers to Walt’s sexuality in such definitive terms, and the question of whether visitors’ prior knowledge of Walt makes a difference is worth considering. I would argue that interpreters should be aware of their audience but not make assumptions about their prior knowledge—especially when the audience is primarily students—and Shapiro would appear to agree.) Instead, said Shapiro, the heart of the matter was the relevance of Walt’s sexuality to the site itself. One of the reasons that the Birthplace objected to the original “Love panel” was also one of the reasons that the Calamus Preservation Society opposed its censorship:

To me, and I think for the others as well, the concern was that the Birthplace was publicly-funded and a site where Long Island school kids were going to all be taken to see. It probably wasn’t that great to be a lesbian or gay teenager in Long Island then (or now), and we wanted the museum to be a place where they could recognize their past, as it were. This is why, I think, we did decide to disrupt the ceremony, since there would be schoolchildren present. If parents yelled at us, so be it, since they might not know something about their children.

The Birthplace’s location in Huntington also played into the Society’s belief that the nature of the site necessitated the change:

The aura of Walt Whitman is crucial to the Huntington region as his name is used to advertise tens of business ventures from the Walt Whitman Mall to local stores. If it weren’t for WW, Huntington would have nothing to distinguish itself from the bland morass that is middle Long Island. As such it provides what geographers call locational value where cultural capital is used to leverage financial capital. Yet, Huntington also has a long-standing lesbian and gay community. It is the site of Long Island’s Pride March and as such may arguably be the largest

\textsuperscript{45} Stephen Shapiro, Email Interview, 29 April 2012.
Pride between NYC and Boston and fourth to Philly on the Northeastern Seaboard. Just why it should have become a LGBT center is unclear. It’s close to Fire Island, but not contiguous. Indeed, Whitman’s aura may have something to do with it. In any case, the WWB prides itself on its local interface, and as such their evasions about same sexuality have the status of a direct affront to its neighbors.

Because the Calamus Society’s mission was specific to the Birthplace site, where no change was effected, they were not ultimately successful. Still, Shapiro does not consider their campaign to be a failure, either: “It’s the nature of activism that sometimes things don’t work out immediately. In retrospect, I think I have a good sense of how we could have built up a campaign, but it didn’t happen.” They did try to do so; the week after the demonstration, they returned to Long Island to distribute flyers at the Huntington Pride March, and soon afterward they leafleted New York Pride (“on shocking pink cardstock!”). (Figures 14 and 15.) The Society also considered staging another zap of the Birthplace:

One plan is to create a sign-on open letter to the WWBA that reiterates the call for the installation to be revised in consultation with lesbian and gay studies scholars. Another potential action might be to present the WWBA with a memorial to Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena to underscore how the Center’s institutional construction of the vulnerable school child, who must be protected from hearing about sexuality, plays into the very violence against youth that the WWBA claims it wants to prevent.47

These plans did not come to fruition. However, because the Society “didn’t want to let the matter drop,” Shapiro organized a session on the subject for the 1998 MLA (Modern Language Association) Convention in San Francisco, at which he and Robinson spoke. Shortly after the demonstration at the Birthplace, Shapiro had contacted Betsy Erkkila and Michael Moon, noted scholars who had published on Whitman, including the

47 Papers of Stephen Shapiro.
representation of his sexuality. He asked them to become involved in crafting and disseminating a letter from lesbian and gay studies scholars to the Birthplace administration; both Erkkila and Moon participated at the MLA event, as well. Shapiro also invited Joann Kreig, who initially gave an ambiguous answer and ultimately declined to join the panel. According to Shapiro, the session was “well-attended as these things go, maybe forty people (although overwhelmingly male). Betsy gave a great talk that went through and talked about the specific ways the Birthplace had cropped images. Michael’s talk was sort of on the lines that it wasn’t believable to hide the history in this way anymore.”

Despite these efforts, the Calamus campaign “just didn’t stick,” said Shapiro. He and Robinson both took academic jobs shortly afterward—Shapiro in Germany and then England, and Robinson in Arizona—making it difficult to continue organizing protests. At the same time, said Shapiro,

personal reasons have larger historical contexts. The period of 97-98 was a transitional one. The AIDS cocktail was proving to be effective, and this meant many in the community were focused on reconstructing their personal lives and consequently were less politically mobilized. Then the dot.com boom was rolling in, and the funny thing about New Yorkers is that grassroots activism doesn't do very well during times of easy money. I should also point out that this was just on the cusp of the diffusion of the internet. In those days, academics had email but many others did not. . . So without face-to-face contact, it was hard to organize.

In the years since the demonstration, the controversy surrounding the exhibit and Whitman’s sexuality in general has remained unaddressed, although the museum (which is now under a new administration) is open to discussing these matters with inquiring researchers. In 2006, Richard Sandall of the University of Leicester requested that the

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48 Stephen Shapiro, Email Interviews, 28 and 29 April 2012.
Birthplace staff fill out a questionnaire for a research project on how museums and historic sites handle including sexual orientation in their interpretive programs. The museum staff’s response sheds light on their view of the debate, nearly a decade after the demonstration:

Is the sexual orientation of Walt Whitman made known to the public, by your organisation?
Yes! However this is a qualified Yes. [The original text, crossed out and replaced in the final version, reads: “No. However this is a qualified No.”] We do not preach concerning, or attempt to prove Walt Whitman’s sexual orientation. We do glorify the man and his works, and his works reveal his sexual preferences...

Factors that shape decisions
The Birthplace is a New York State Historic Site. The State of New York is democratic in that there is a policy of non-involvement in matters of historic sexual orientation. However, the site is managed by The Walt Whitman Birthplace Association, a non profit society of poets, that encourages freedom of thought . . . School groups make up most of our public attendance . . . The Birthplace farmhouse, our primary artifact, was home to Whitman for only the first four years of his life so explanations concerning his homosexuality might not have relevance to the tours going through it. The interpretation focuses on a day in the life of the Whitman family...

Visitor Response
Often during tours, visitors have asked whether or not Whitman was ever married. When they are told that he did not marry, the panel provides some reasons why he did not. During the grand opening of the interpretive center and exhibit ceremonies, members of the gay community ran to the podium and threw chalk board erasers at the panel shouting we were erasing history . . . On the other hand, we had a negative reaction from another point of view, when a Methodist Minister demanded a refund before he left the building with his family because of the panel’s implied sinfulness. He refused to let his children tour the site. We try our best to answer questions concerning Walt Whitman’s life, and realize that he can be an inspiration to all young people who might need encouragement regarding their sexual preferences.
Interpretation might vary depending on the guide that is available.49

When I asked David Robinson whether he could envision a time when the history of the controversy was included in the Birthplace’s interpretation, he said:

To me, that’s exactly what a museum ought to do. That’s part of the history of Whitman, of course, his reception and the understanding of him, so for a museum to actually document how their own presentation of Whitman has evolved or changed over the years, it actually makes them seem more relevant. There never just is one interpretation . . . I could see an exhibit there where you actually present Whitman in three different ways: one in which you completely suppress all of the homoerotic stuff, one the way they did it, and one in which it’s actually much more from the perspective that we were offering. Your exhibit becomes kind of a lesson in interpretation and starts to break down some of the typical ways in which museums often seem to be presenting an authoritative single story.50

I told him about the similar Alternative Label Project at the Hull House Museum, and that he had described precisely my sentiments and suggestions. While Walt’s sexuality is certainly not related to the physical, spatial fabric of his Birthplace house, the house gains its significance from the legacy of his poetry, where his sexuality holds bearing. The accompanying Interpretive Center purports to “delve deeply into Whitman’s life and work;” to deemphasize his homosexual affections within the context of presenting his love is misleading. Furthermore, if Walt’s sexuality was not relevant before the controversy, it is now; the story of the controversy over interpreting his life, including the Calamus Preservation Society demonstration, is now a part of the Birthplace’s heritage that, like his sexuality itself, deserves to be told.

49 University of Leicester questionnaire, 1996, Archive, Walt Whitman Birthplace Historic Site and Interpretive Center.
50 David Robinson, Phone Interview.
IV. Political Controversy

Key Case Study: Val-Kill

Walt Whitman sparked scandal by expressing his sexuality in his works; for other historic people, however, the question of their sexuality is itself the subject of controversy. Debates over the facts of famous figures’ personal lives grow more pointed when issues of national pride and politics are involved. These issues do complicate the Whitman Birthplace interpretation, as the poet has come to represent America democratic ideals, and the revision process of the Birthplace’s exhibit included references to a political rationale. Moreover, high public profile heightens both interest and caution in speculating about politicians’ private lives. In the time before homosexuality was named and sexual identities defined, it is possible that James Buchanan was the United States’ first non-heterosexual president, although his surviving correspondence with potential lover William King leaves room for dispute.¹ The much-deliberated likelihood of same-sex attraction, most famously with Joshua Speed, has threatened to infiltrate Abraham Lincoln’s mythical image in the American memory.² (Farmington, the Speed house museum in Louisville, Kentucky, does not publicize this speculation, although the museum celebrates a connection with Lincoln.)³ Perhaps the most notorious sexuality debate among scholars of American history surrounds Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and a greatly influential figure in her own right. The United States’ official historical canon has inscribed her legacy as the longest-serving First Lady who revolutionized that role, then continued to forge her own career as a writer and politician,

most notably as the first chairman of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. From 1935 until her death, she wrote the popular syndicated newspaper column “My Day,” which “reached millions of Americans, who felt they knew her personally.” Her place in LGBT heritage, however, is fraught with intrigue and uncertainty, with both frenzied discussion and silence.

Eleanor’s legacy is spatially embodied at Val-Kill, her cottage in Hyde Park, New York. (Fig. 10.) Now administered by the National Park Service (NPS) and advertised as the only National Historic Site honoring a First Lady, Val-Kill served as Eleanor’s “retreat, her office, her home, and her ‘laboratory’ for social change.” In 1924, FDR gave several acres of land, part of his Hyde Park property, to Eleanor and her friends Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, who were life partners and knew Eleanor from the Democratic State Committee. He helped architect Henry Toombs design a stone cottage in the Dutch Colonial style for the property; Nancy and Marion moved into this Stone Cottage, and Eleanor lived with them during weekends and holidays. The three women and their friend Caroline O’Day founded Val-Kill Industries at the site in 1926, a furniture factory where they trained local people in craft skills. When the successful business closed in 1936, Eleanor made a personal retreat of the factory building, which she had enlarged into a rambling, L-shaped cottage; Marion and Nancy lived in the Stone Cottage next door until 1947. Her closeness with the lesbian couple had occasionally raised eyebrows and suspicions, as did certain other relationships in her life, most notably with journalist Lorena Hickock, whom Eleanor called Hick, and bodyguard Earl Miller.

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6 “Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site.”
For decades, Eleanor’s sexuality and relationships have inspired controversy among historians and biographers. While the Roosevelts have long attracted scholarly attention, a particular flurry of activity among historians followed the opening of eighteen cardboard cartons on May 1, 1978. Hick had left the boxes with the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, upon her death with the stipulation that they not be opened until this day, exactly ten years later. Inside, researchers discovered several thousand letters between Hick and Eleanor Roosevelt that revealed the deep intimacy of their relationship.7 Doris Faber, the first scholar to happen upon the trove, wrote about her findings in her 1980 book, *The Life of Lorena Hickok, E.R.’s Friend*, but expressed reluctance to do so:

> Because of Eleanor Roosevelt’s renown, their story belongs to history. I wish this were not so. . . . I have described my own unavailing effort to postpone the inevitable disclosure. . . . Where I have been unable to find reliable evidence I have preferred leaving the reader to make his or her own surmises about what occurred, rather than to weave unsupported presumptions into the record.8

Faber discusses speculation about the nature of Eleanor and Hick’s relationship with ambivalence, referring to both sides of the debate (that they were either lovers or friends) without drawing conclusions. Two years later, Joseph P. Lash published *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends*, which followed several other books on Eleanor by the same author, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Eleanor and Franklin*. Despite his close friendship with Eleanor, Lash expressed his concern about the limits of biography and the vast potential for inaccurately defining another person’s life, reflecting reluctance similar to Faber’s:9

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8 Faber 5-6.
Was their relationship then a lesbian one? That is to be doubted, but the time is past when ‘lesbianism’ is to be considered a term of reproach rather than a style of fulfillment. Moreover, who is to say what ‘lesbianism’ is? . . . This book is an effort to understand some fragments of biographical reality. The fragments raise questions to which there cannot be complete answers.  

In the book’s introduction, FDR and Eleanor’s son, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., also encourages readers to utilize caution in interpreting his mother’s correspondence, but he uses a somewhat more urgent tone:  

In 1979, when the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, without notice to the Roosevelt family, opened to the press and scholars the correspondence between my mother and Lorena Hickok, I urged that my mother’s letters be read in the context of those written to other close friends and that her style of writing be judged in the framework of what was considered customary and conventional when she was growing up.

While the title of J. William T. Young’s 1985 book, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*, highlights this duality that biography and preservation struggle to balance, Young does not explore the complications of Eleanor and Hick’s relationship within this context, instead concluding from their letters: “Certainly they declared their love for one another. Such declarations were common, however, among women in those days. Eleanor’s reticence about sex and her fundamental loyalty to Franklin probably kept her relationship to Hick within the bounds of convention.”

To the credit of all of these authors, they do include reference to conjecture about Eleanor and Hick, and either provide an evidentiary basis for its dismissal or make no interpretation. By 1998, however, the scholarly dialogue

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10 Lash xiv-xv.
had grown less cautious, as exemplified by Rodger Streitmatter’s *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok*, in which he makes an overt argument for a romantic relationship.\(^{13}\)

The most highly acclaimed—as well as controversial—biographical work to follow the release of the Hickok letters, Blanche Wiesen Cook’s two tomes (*Volume III* has yet to be published) invigorated public interest in Eleanor’s personal life. *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume I*, published in 1992 and addressing Eleanor’s life from 1884 to 1933, pointedly discusses not only Eleanor’s extramarital intimacies but also, in more detail than previous biographies, the nature of the evidence and the reasons why conjecture about her relationships exists. Of Earl Miller, Cook says, “There are rumors that a voluminous correspondence between Earl Miller and ER was anonymously purchased and destroyed, or purchased and locked away . . . In the absence of any significant contemporary account, we have only the fact of the cover-up to fuel our speculations and theories.”\(^{14}\) The volume concludes with an entire chapter on Hick, including Cook’s analysis of why historians have tended to “caricature” Hick and understate the nature of her love with Eleanor:

Like the disappearance of ER’s correspondence with Earl Miller, the answer in retrospect seems evident: Today, our generation continues to cringe and turn away from cross-class, cross-generational, or same-sex relationships. In this instance, however, both Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok saved their correspondence, although Hickok typed, edited, and then burned the originals of ER’s letters between 1932 and 1933 and many more of her own letters over the years. For all the deletions and restraint, the thousands of letters that remain are amorous and specific . . . There are few ambiguities in this correspondence, and a letter that was defined as ‘particularly


susceptible to misinterpretation’ reads: ‘I wish I could lie down beside you tonight & take you in my arms.’

In *Volume II*, covering the years 1933 through 1938 and published in 1999, Cook addressed criticism of *Volume I*:

. . . some people recoiled from the possibility that ER might have had passion and love in her life outside her marriage and apart from FDR. They were particularly disturbed by the presence of Earl Miller and Lorena Hickok at the heart of her story. One woman, a human rights worker, was aghast that ER had ‘lesbian friends, or was a lesbian, or some such thing.’ When asked if she read the book, she replied: ‘No, I wouldn’t read it; I wouldn’t touch it!’ Such views, even on the part of those who claim to respect and admire Eleanor Roosevelt, reflect the kind of determined ignorance she worked so hard to uproot. After a lifetime of loving, with all the difficulties and contradictions love involves, it seems a peculiar and sad commentary that people who claim to know ER do not care to know about the relationships that most absorbed and concerned her.

Given Eleanor’s prominence as a political figure, and the fact that homosexuality is still not fully accepted in today’s political climate, I was curious to learn how Cook’s observations about the reception to intimations of romantic intimacy between Eleanor and Hick would compare to the interpretation at a National Historic Site. I feared they would be similar; still, I was rather taken aback at what I experienced during a public tour of Val-Kill. Despite their role in the establishment of Val-Kill, Nancy and Marion were scarcely mentioned, and not as a couple. The tour focused on Eleanor’s career as a civil rights leader, especially pointing out the spaces where she had met with prominent diplomats and politicians; little of Eleanor’s personal life emerged. However, as soon as we had climbed the stairs to the bedroom realm of the second story, my guide raised the topic of lesbian

15 Cook 478-479.
rumors without being prompted. She then summarily dismissed them by pointing out the proximity of Earl Miller's bedroom to Eleanor's, indicating that the two spaces were connected. She gave an explanation that merits inclusion in its entirety:

Guide: This room here was used by Eleanor's very good friend Earl Miller. He became a bodyguard for her when Franklin became governor, and he kind of brought Eleanor out of her shell. She really was sort of strict and uptight for a while there. He got her back on the horse again. Got her back into horseback riding, she'd kind of stopped that. He taught her how to shoot a pistol. Believe it or not, she didn't have bodyguards later in life, she carried a .38 in her purse. So she had reasons to not be afraid. Earl Miller was a very young, handsome former state trooper. He had the room next to hers; that bathroom there connects to hers. Every time people come here and say [whispers] "wasn't she a lesbian?" I just say, "Earl Miller." [laughter] Like, I don't think so. But you know, I think, since she had such a dark and scary childhood, and she was always craving love, from anybody, she took love from anybody, so I don't think it mattered if it was a man or a woman. She wasn't sexual. That wasn't her thing at all. She thought sex was a chore. So she really just liked being around lots and lots of people...

Me: So did Lorena Hickock not come here?

Guide: Oh she was here. Yeah, she was here quite a lot, actually.

Male visitor: Who's that?

Guide: Lorena Hickock. There are people who say that they were... lovers. Uh, you know, a friend of mine grew up here in Hyde Park, he's in his sixties now, and he knew Lorena Hickock, and he's like, 'oh yeah, she was a lesbian.' And he's like, 'oh, but I don't think Eleanor was.' But I don't know. I mean, if you were a fly on the wall, that'd be great. But I don't know. If you talk to anyone who's in Parks, they're like, 'no, no, she wasn't.' And it's entirely possible that she might have swung that way a couple times, I don't know... It doesn't matter to me. If she was, it doesn't matter.

Female visitor: Me neither.

Guide: If she was, awesome, good for her. If not, whatever, you know? She's still an awesome lady no matter what, no matter who she loved. But what amazes me is how she could sleep out on that porch in the wintertime...
Presenting a debate in terms of conflicting historians’ opinions and evidence would be one matter; explaining a controversy strictly in terms of one’s personal speculations and rumors is quite another. My guide deserves credit for engaging with my question, for entertaining the possibility that Eleanor had relationships with women, and especially for repeating “I don’t know” rather than presenting her interpretation as fact. (She earns less praise for her affirmation that Eleanor is “still an awesome lady . . . no matter who she loved,” which, really, should go without saying.) However, that she would initiate the topic of lesbian rumors on her own and then not mention Lorena, who was undeniably a significant figure both in the context of the rumors but also generally in Eleanor’s life, was disappointing. More surprisingly, she based her declarations about Eleanor’s sexuality on spatial interpretation and local gossip but offered no mention of the extensive collection of Eleanor’s correspondence, even though it is held by the National Parks Service and surely has been the source of other information besides the intimacy of Eleanor and Hick. Her intimations that Eleanor and Earl were sexually involved seemed to contradict her asexualizing of Eleanor. After entering Eleanor’s bedroom, the guide changed the subject to explain that Eleanor actually spent her nights on the adjoining “sleeping porch;” whether or not this is true, the guide’s maladroit segue to the porch served to physically displace Eleanor from the bedroom. She mentioned neither Earl nor Lorena again. For an interpreter to favor one conjecture over an incompletely represented version of another conjecture, one with equal if not more evidence but less political acceptability, is irresponsible. Furthermore, the use of speculation as the basis for denying speculation is not a sound interpretive technique and implies an underlying and inappropriate bias.
It is important to clarify that the approach of an individual interpreter does not necessarily represent that of the National Park Service as a whole. According to Frank Futral, a curator at the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites,

Because we have ranger-guided tours, the focus of your tour is going to be directed in some way by the person leading it, and then add to that, by the questions that come up from the group that’s on the tour. But we don't have a pre-scripted interpretive outline that everyone has to stick to. We don't really make any specific effort to introduce controversial topics. We expect they will come up in the course of discussion.

Instead, he said, the prescribed interpretation centers on the legislative language addressing the significance of the site and its reason for being a National Parks Service unit. This language does not typically go into the details of personal life, so as Futral explained, “We start with not the fact that she was even a First Lady or that her husband was the President, but we really focus on her post-White House career, her role as a world leader in human rights. From there, anything could happen.” He noted that the Roosevelt Sites include gay employees, therefore, he said, the staff as a whole is not afraid to discuss the topic of alternate sexualities, but suggested that some interpreters might shy away from that element of Eleanor’s story because they are of an older generation and more traditional in their viewpoints. He said that the Park Service will not change interpreters’ opinions but expressed hope that they would “handle them in a responsible way.”

Otherwise, the Park Service’s current official stance is not to have an official stance:

I think we’re all quite comfortable in the way we’re handling it and in the way it works currently. If we had to sit down and write some kind of a document that said, ‘this is what we think’ or what our position is, that would probably be much more difficult... history is interpretation, and even among ourselves here, we’re going to have a difference of opinion on how you would retell that story, where you’d place the emphasis. If we had to write an audio tour where everybody was going to hear
the same thing, I don’t know how we’d do that. You won’t find any documents here that say what to say if someone asks if ER was a lesbian.

The site, he said, by nature focuses much more on Eleanor’s public, political life than on her private life: “The reason why Val Kill exists as a National Historic Site is because of Mrs. Roosevelt’s public career as a leader of the Democratic party, as a very politically active voice in this country, and as a leader in human rights.” At the same time, Futral believes it is unfair to insist that only Eleanor’s public life, and not her private life, is important; for instance, if a young gay person came to Val Kill seeking a role model, he or she should not be told, “You are looking at the wrong person.”

It follows that the interpretation should have a degree of malleability based on the interests of specific visitors, while at the same time stressing the importance of primary sources and not jumping to conclusions. In the case of Eleanor’s relationships, Futral said that interpretation should emphasize that there was more than one person with whom she expressed intimacy, so you “can’t box Mrs. Roosevelt into one particular mold.” When he personally faces the question of Eleanor’s sexuality, based on his knowledge of her history and correspondence, he replies:

My understanding of Mrs. Roosevelt is that she was capable of having a very deep personal relationship with both men and women. One person usually, at any given point in her life, really was the object of much of her affection. But in terms of her sexuality, the only thing we know for sure is that she had five children with Franklin Roosevelt. We want to be respectful of the public’s questions and of anyone who might be coming to Val Kill because that’s a particular question they’re interested in, but at the same time we want to be accurate. . . Whether or not E.R. was a lesbian or had a lesbian relationship, or how many affairs F.D.R. had, is no different from balancing that fine line between presenting the historical facts as best we can without making too many judgments. I think what we try to do
is tell folks what we know and let people draw their own conclusions. We’re happy to engage in that discussion.

As a side note, Futral mentioned that the Park Service will likely soon have more reason to engage with this particular topic. NPS is preparing to open the Stone Cottage to the public for the first time, and hopes to soon enter the fabrication phase with exhibits for that building that will focus on the “early years” of Val-Kill. The exhibit will include reference to Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman’s friendship with Eleanor, and will feature some of the linens and silvers that are inscribed with the three women’s joint monogram. Futral expects that these items will raise questions among visitors about the women’s personal relationships and, even before that, will require the Parks Service to address the objects’ context in writing label copy. He also expressed anticipation that as LGBT history becomes more mainstream and successive generations become increasingly comfortable with the topic, more related information will emerge in the preservation world. The question of political influence upon interpretation, he said, is particularly interesting to the Park Service because, “We represent the U.S. government when we’re interpreting history here. We haven’t encountered a situation where it’s become problematic or particularly challenging for us, but you do wonder sometimes: these are people who were very partisan, politically active people, so how do you interpret the life of the significant American without endorsing a particular political view?” Complicating this challenge is the fact that visitors bring their own political views and preconceived notions, which, along with the abundance of historical publications focusing on the Roosevelts, leads to inquiry into all aspects of their lives. He has never seen an NPS policy forbidding interpreters from discussing any particular topic and sees Eleanor’s sexuality as “just one controversial topic in a sea of others; to try to cover up one would be pointless.” Still, NPS leaves the focused
exploration of those topics to the history scholars who are researching and publishing independently. Futral asserted that controversy never overtakes the interpretive direction at Val-Kill because there is so much to discuss about Eleanor’s career in the course of the tour. Overall, Futral said, “I think we feel that our area of expertise here is in the preservation of the site and communicating the primary reasons why these properties are worthy of being National Historic Sites. So at least for now, the controversial topics don’t lend much to the significance, but we do want to do a good job at handling them.”

Futral pointed out that, “In the historic context, regardless of what one may argue about where lesbian and gay issues fall in the discourse of human rights, those weren’t particularly the issues that the UN was faced with when [Eleanor] was drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so it’s really hard to state what her position might be on those issues.” Still, it seems ironic that a Val-Kill guide would present her as a civil rights figure, as does the museum’s permanent exhibit, while actively denying her connection to the LGBT community, the focus of many civil rights efforts at the current time. The site’s interpretation might grow emboldened to address these issues as the political climate continues to shift in favor of LGBT civil rights. On the one hand, the interpretation should be flexible to heighten its relevance by reflecting the spirit of the times; on the other, it should be sturdy enough that no gust of political change can overturn it. Preservation is often viewed as inherently political for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that landmark recognition occurs in the political realm and through political processes. However, can historic significance change with political climate? Perhaps, but

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17 Frank Futral, Phone Interview, 26 March 2012.
18 Futral, interview.
either way, the basis of interpretation does not change: Val-Kill represents Eleanor’s private world, a world that is incomplete without Hick.
V. Stakeholders and Resources

Key Case Study: Manitoga

At certain house museums, interpretive complications arise not from the nature of the site or the acceptability of the LGBT story behind it; the omission of a historic person’s sexuality is not due to active suppression but, rather, a matter of stakeholders’ competing priorities and interpretations. The situation grows even more complex when those stakeholders include living relatives of the historic person. Such is the case at Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center, the home that Russel Wright (1904-1976) designed for himself in Garrison, New York. (Fig. 11.) An industrial designer who “revolutionized the American home and the way people lived there,” Russel’s American Modern dinnerware pattern sold over a quarter of a billion pieces from 1939 to 1959. His mass-produced tableware, appliances, furniture, and textiles rendered modern design available to the American public, and made him a household name.\(^1\) The great extent of his popularity and influence stemmed partially from the marketing prowess of his wife Mary, whom he had married in 1927; in fact, his switch from theatrical set design to industrial design owes credit to Mary’s encouragement.\(^2\)

In 1941, after a years-long search for a location, they purchased eighty acres of overgrown land, including an abandoned quarry, in Garrison, and Russel set to work at shaping the property to suit their needs and his design philosophy and aesthetic. In particular, Manitoga is remarkable for his nuanced manipulation and incorporation of nature into the design, sculpting the landscape into a number of trails and bringing natural

elements into the buildings through stunningly innovative details.³ Russel and Mary lived in a small cabin while he was developing landscape and house plans; although she was involved in the early stages, she died of breast cancer in 1952 before construction began. The couple adopted a daughter, Annie, who was two years old at the time of her mother’s death.⁴ Annie’s impression of the fantastical landscape lent to the house the name Dragon Rock. Architect David Leavitt, whose work Russel had admired in Japan, assisted him with the design of the house. According to Manitoga’s National Historic Landmark Registration Form, “The house was an intensely personal design. . . Nevertheless, it was also an experiment intended to demonstrate how a modern American family might live following the principles embodied in his aesthetic and design philosophy.”⁵ The house’s spatial arrangement “was designed to accommodate the specific needs of Wright and his family, which, by the time construction was completed, consisted of Wright, his young daughter, and his daughter’s governess.”⁶ Specifically, he “divided the building into three separate spheres:” a private realm for his own studio and bedroom—in fact, in a separate building—as well as a wing for Annie and her governess, with a communal family space between them, including a kitchen, den, and living and dining rooms.⁷ (Fig. 12.) In 1964, a new relationship formed: Russel met Joe Chapman, a graphic designer living and working in Manhattan. While Annie was away in boarding school and college, Joe spent weekends at Manitoga, staying with Russel in the studio building, and the two were romantic partners until Russel’s death in 1976. Manitoga Inc., was created in 1986 to oversee the property; it

³ LaFrank 23.
⁴ LaFrank 25.
⁵ LaFrank 4.
⁶ LaFrank 26.
⁷ LaFrank 5, 26.
began to offer house tours in 2003, and restored Russel’s studio in 2004.8 Both Joe and Annie have held leadership positions on Manitoga’s Board of Directors, and Annie lived in the house until 2001. Joe’s relationship with Russel comprises much of the period of significance determined for the property: “The intent of [the] architectural conservation team working today at Manitoga is to exhibit the house and studio as it appeared during the 15-years of Russel Wright’s occupancy (1961-1976) with the greatest possible accuracy.”9 Still, albeit through no apparent act of concealment or denial, the relationship is relegated to the realm of common knowledge within the local community, and remains excluded from interpretation related to Russel.

On the Manitoga website, only once does Joe’s name appear outside of his position on the Board. Excerpted from a seminar held in 2003, David Leavitt alludes to Joe’s time with Russel at Manitoga and his involvement in the design of the grounds:

This first path that [Russel] and Joe Chapman created around the quarry, with its bridges, stepping stones, open and closed spaces, fields of moss or flowers, vistas, etc. was a blueprint for all the future trails Russel and Joe spent so many happy hours creating. All of which is perfectly consistent with the design intent and philosophy of the house.10

Advertisement for a guided tour of one of these trails in the Putnam County News and Recorder one year later made no such allusion: “Manitoga Vice President and old friend of Russel Wright, Joe Chapman, will lead a hike to Lost Pond.”11 In contrast, an article in The New York Times outrightly addressed Russel’s sexuality and even went so far as to draw parallels between Russel’s private life and his design:

Wright was fascinated with opposites and contrasts. White Formica wall panels flip to red. Shoji screens transform walls into doors. An austere hanging light fixture becomes a whimsical decorative accessory when dressed in the seasonal ruffle he slipped over the shade in summer. Wright's life, too, had a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't element. Bisexual, he enjoyed years of happy marriage to Mary and, after her death in 1952, an equally satisfying romantic relationship with Joe Chapman, a graphic designer. Wright adopted a daughter, Ann, with Mary; after her mother died, Ann lived in Dragon Rock with her governess, while her father slept and bathed in the separate male domain of his studio.12

Certainly nowhere else does the word “bisexual” describe Russel, and no other formal publication has discussed Joe and Russel’s relationship.13 In 2011, Michael Gotkin, a landscape architect and preservationist, planned to do so in his book called Artists’ Handmade Houses. The book explores thirteen houses, “each designed and built by the artists as an expression of their aesthetic sentiments, and in many cases, as extensions of their artwork;” one chapter is devoted to Manitoga, but mention of Russel’s bisexuality was censored.14 According to Gotkin,

I wrote a chapter for my book that talked about Russel Wright being gay and how this affected his design for his own home. I was pleased, as I thought I would be among the first to publish on it. I also wanted to give some design credit to his boyfriend, who is still alive. Without telling me, my publisher removed all references to Wright’s sexuality and to his boyfriend. I did not find out until the book was published. . . . Perhaps the publisher feared being sued, though on what grounds this could be done I am not sure.15

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13 The Putnam County Historical Society website does say of Manitoga, “Wright lived there with his daughter, Ann, and later with his life partner, Joe Chapman.” pchs-fsm.blogspot.com
15 Michael Gotkin, Email Interview, 15 March 2012.
Gotkin was so “horrified” with the censorship of his text that he never read the final book. He noted that another chapter on archeologist and antiquarian Henry C. Mercer and his house museum, Fonthill, underwent similar alteration to remove references to homosexuality, so the concern was not necessarily limited to Russel Wright, and the editing was partially due to “the publisher’s resistance to including anything remotely provocative.” Still, he perceived the omission of Wright’s sexuality at the house itself, as well, which, regardless of intentionality on the part of the staff, does seem to be the case to a large degree.16

Visitors to Manitoga take a ninety-minute tour that begins with a fifteen-minute official video, which was produced in 2002. The video focuses on Russel’s significance and work as a designer, as evidenced at Manitoga. The narrative does include bits of Russel’s personal life and relationships; most notably that, "in 1952, Mary Wright, Russel’s loyal and supportive partner, died, leaving him with their two year old daughter, Annie." Annie is identified as “Daughter of Mary and Russel Wright” and comments on her parents’ relationship (“I think they were extremely wonderful friends”). Joe Chapman appears on screen several times and is identified as “Graphic Designer, Companion of Russel Wright,” but the video provides no context for this label. Manitoga’s docent manual for the guided tour that follows the video is a thorough, scholarly document that includes a chronology of Russel’s life and background information on his work, his significance to modernism, and the design and restoration of the site. The manual then provides a tour script, which guides are not expected to memorize: “Each guide should impart the same basic information, but

16 Michael Gotkin, Phone Interview, 22 March 2012.
the words you share with the public will be your own.”17 Focusing on the many features of Russel’s design and explaining the philosophy behind them, the tour takes visitors through the landscape, the studio, and the main home. The studio is “where we get ‘up close and personal’ with how RW lived. He slept and worked here, and shared the kitchen and living area of the house with Ann and her governess (remember that Mary had passed away in 1952.)”18 Of Ann’s section of the house, the manual says, “RW called this section of the home ‘The Harem’ which would no doubt be considered politically incorrect by many today. The wing originally housed Annie’s room, her governess Diana’s room, their shared bathroom and the former garage. With the exception of the bathroom, all of these rooms now contain office and/or collection storage.”19 The only mention of Joe occurs not during the studio or house portions of the tour but amidst the landscape: “JOE’S ROOMS, named for RW’s companion and fellow designer Joe Chapman, are a good example of how Wright layered vegetation for dramatic effect, like the set designer that he was.”20

Because the house was closed for the season at the time of my research, I received a gracious private tour from Vivian Linares, the site’s Program Director. She confirmed that Manitoga’s interpretation emphasizes Russel’s career and leaves out the personal dimension, partially, she said, because no biography of Russel exists. She expressed a sincere desire to “integrate the personal and professional” someday, when Manitoga has the funding to hire someone to redevelop the interpretive plan. Gender played a role in her explanation of the buildings’ spatial arrangement—the male-oriented domain of Russel’s

studio and bedroom, the female or Harem zone, and the communal zone—but not sexuality. Linares was open about the fact that Russel and Joe were companions, and that Joe is regarded as a particularly special board member because of his connection to the house. Sometimes his reminiscences are used to supplement photographic evidence as the basis for restoring the house and its furnishings; for example, Linares pointed out a bust of Buddha in the communal space that, on a recent visit, Joe had insisted was in an inaccurate place and so had been moved. She remarked that Annie and Joe sometimes tell conflicting stories, which, of course, indicates the nature of human memory, as well as the fact that they lived at the house during different times.21

When there are so many stakeholders involved—Board members, staff members, preservationists, and especially living family members—stories and opinions are bound to diverge. At Manitoga, these variations particularly came to light during the restoration process in 2004. According to one member of the preservation team, Michael Devonshire:

There were meetings which Annie and Joe both attended, during which we were to make some significant decisions about finishes, etc., and the divergence of their memories and vehement defense thereof on each of their parts, made me realize how good we have it when doing informational gathering for the restoration of houses where everyone involved is six feet under.

On the subject of stakeholders’ opinions regarding the interpretation of Russel's private life, Devonshire said,

I think that you'll find a general reluctance on the part of the folks at Manitoga to put light on Russel's sexual proclivities. I don't sense that there is an "official" directive to keep the information concealed, but I've never gotten the sense that

21 Vivian Linares, Personal Interview, 1 March 2012.
they have viewed it as a necessary or influential aspect of the development of the property.\footnote{Anonymous, Email Interview, 26-28 March 2012.}

Margaret Doyle, who was in charge of the restoration of the studio, offered a different perspective on similar subjects. She joined the Board of Manitoga in 2000, and in 2003 became Co-President with her husband, Andrew Capitman, and Annie Wright. Doyle and Capitman resigned in 2007 due to inter-board turmoil, such as can often occur when a group of personalities share oversight responsibility; Joe moved to emeritus status around the same time. Until then, they had been intimately involved with the property. Doyle explained that she and the Board agreed to restore the studio to the date of 1961-1962, because the house had been photographed for four different publications during that period, and this documentation provided a solid evidentiary basis on which to base the restoration. While Joe participated in the process and provided useful details gleaned from his memories of life at Manitoga, Doyle also speculated that he felt cut out from the restoration due to the chosen date; he had not begun staying at Manitoga until late 1964 or early 1965, and because of Russel’s ever-fluctuating design, many of Joe’s memories could not be applied to a 1961-dated restoration. As Doyle said, “Whenever you have a family member, you have to strive to treat them with a certain respect... but you also have to have enough knowledge yourself, if you’re involved in the project, to know what’s real and what’s not,” in terms of accurate preservation technique. She also asserted that the Board, Joe, and Annie have always been open about Russel’s relationship with Joe, and that any omission of that element of Russel’s story is surely due to the fact that the Manitoga staff has “too much on their plate.” She did observe that little has been written about Joe, but
attributed this to the surprising fact that Russel himself has not received as much scholarly and popular attention as his reputation during his lifetime would otherwise suggest.

The dating to which Doyle referred is, indeed, problematic from an interpretive standpoint. As Annie Wright confirmed, the choice of 1961 as a restoration baseline “makes it a little more controversial because I think that Joe Chapman likes to have a hand in the restoration ideas, but he didn’t meet my father until 1964, so that means his memories are then a little skewed.” Personally, she is not concerned with the choice of date, which she views as somewhat arbitrary given the constant transformation of the house: “I don’t think it makes that much difference; the house was still changing and being worked on by 1961 or 1962, so who knows, and I actually think that if my father was alive now, the house would look completely different because he was always changing things. That’s what artists do. But you have to stop somewhere, so I guess you might as well say early ’60s.” Still, whether the restoration date can serve as an excuse to exclude Russel’s relationship with Joe remains a valid question. If the most photographic documentation exists to inform restoration to that date, as Doyle suggested, that would certainly support the decision, as visual evidence is a more reliable basis than personal memory. Still, assuming that this date was the best choice, it should not preclude mention of Joe; Russel’s personal life prior to 1961—including his marriage to Mary—is mentioned, as is his career post-1961. Physically restoring a site to a particular year should not freeze the accompanying interpretation to that year, or remove the site from the context of the rest of its existence. Along these lines, there is also the fact, according to the site’s statement of “Architectural Conservation Philosophy,” the restoration attempts to exhibit the house as it appeared from 1961 to

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23 Margaret Doyle, Personal Interview, 28 March 2012.
24 Annie Wright, Phone Interview, 11 April 2012.
1974, the period of Russel’s occupancy, which includes the entirety of Joe’s part-time occupancy, as well.\(^{25}\) While controversy related to the restoration date is justified, it should ideally be moot; if Joe is part of the site’s story, the technicalities of the preservation process do not change that.

Recalling the issues of biographical and site-based relevance in previous case studies, the question remains of how—or whether—to place Russel’s sexuality within the Manitoga story. Annie Wright would like to see Russel’s personal life interpreted to the degree it presents a confluence with his career; more specifically, she thinks that representing his friendships with other artists and architects of the modern movement would be relevant, placing the house more within the context of the period. In terms of interpreting his more intimate relationships, she said, “Sometimes those questions come up, and when I’m doing tours [at Manitoga], I’m perfectly happy to answer them. . . In a way, what’s important is that [Russel] tried to create a dwelling for both of us. I’m not sure how important it was that Joe was there once in a while. He never stayed for any length of time.” She explained that she and Joe never occupied the house at the same time; when her father met him, she was attending a boarding high school, from which she graduated in 1968, and she said that he was not living there when she returned to Manitoga for holidays and moved back after college. “I can’t say what happened when I wasn’t there, but [Joe’s] stuff was never there. If a person was living there, then they would have stuff.” Annie did note that Russel had “sort of a triangle with Margaret Spader,” a home economist, magazine editor, and food writer who frequented Manitoga and whom Annie viewed as a surrogate mother of sorts. “She had no idea about Joe until much later on, and I think that was very

\(^{25}\) Haynes 40.
shocking to her,” said Annie; “I think in some ways she had been waiting for my father to ask her to marry him. . . Maybe because of the era he kept [Joe] a secret.” Russel dated various other women from prominent New York families, according to Annie, who provided a complicated image of Russel’s personal life:

There were women. See there’s a lot of controversy here over whether you can really be bisexual or whether you’re really homosexual. Nobody’s really answered that question definitely. But he liked women; he didn’t dislike women. Maybe he was just looking for a mother for me. I think he and Joe did have a relationship. I can’t tell you definitively how involved it was in what year—I think it probably spanned over a number of years—but there were also these women. . . I do know that he enjoyed the company of women and he enjoyed men too, and he might have been a little more secretive about the men, but he was always home for dinner, so it wasn’t like there was something going on. . . I’m sure that he did have some male lovers but I don’t know. Actually, I do know who a couple of them were, but they weren’t around for very long.

As for the argument that Russel intended his relegation of the studio to a separate building as an assertion of sexuality, Annie said, “that could be partially true. I’m not sure what he had in mind.” She added, however, “I don’t remember any secret people going over to the little house,” and clarified that guests would sleep in the smaller building because there was no other guest bedroom. Of course, it would have been perfectly possible for Russel, in his careful design, to place the guest room in the larger house instead, but as Annie said, it is “hard to know what was in his head.”

In order to obtain the closest possible perspective on Russel and Joe’s partnership, I also spoke with Joe himself. He noted that he has been “mentioned in a few places,” such as the book that he helped Russel produce called Good Design is for Everyone, in which he is identified as Russel’s companion; “In those days that was the term,” he said, “but now I call

26 Annie Wright.
him my life partner.” Still, he admitted that their relationship has not been discussed in the context of Russel’s life at Manitoga: “It didn’t seem terribly important because the house was done by [Russel] himself and his creation.” Joe confirmed that he was involved in the design of the landscape, but that he was “mainly doing what [Russel] wanted done. He was the designer. I pulled a lot of weeds.” The story that is not told at Manitoga is that after Mary Wright died, Russel lived at Manitoga on weekends until 1964, when he moved there full-time. Russel and Joe met the same year at a dinner party in New York; it happened that they were both planning to go to the World’s Fair the next day, so they went together. According to Joe, it became clear during the course of the day that they “loved all of the same things,” and Russel invited Joe to visit Manitoga. Ultimately, Joe lived with Russel at Manitoga on the weekends, and worked in Manhattan during the week; by this time, Annie’s governess had moved away, and Ann had left for boarding school. The relationship lasted over a decade until Russel, who was thirty years older than Joe, died on December 23, 1976. As Joe reflected, “I think I was the last thing he expected in his life, but when he was dying he said the twelve-and-a-half years with me were the happiest time of his life.”

Joe could not speculate whether Russel would have wanted Manitoga’s interpretation to delve into his private life and relationships, largely because in Russel’s era, “life was very different then for gay people. I mean, no one talked about it in public and it was a very difficult time, as I’m sure you know from gay history. It wasn’t easy, and people did not accept it.” While Russel had opened the grounds of Manitoga to the public two years prior to his death, he did not anticipate that his house would become a museum. In his will, he left a third of his personal effects to Joe, one third to Margaret Spader, and one third to daughter Annie. Joe and Margaret took a few items from the house that they
wanted to keep, but the house itself was left to Annie as a life estate. She did not inherit the studio, which was used for Manitoga’s office and to house the caretaker. In 2001, Manitoga, Inc., obtained Annie’s life estate interest; by this time, Joe said, both the studio and house were in poor condition. Today, he said, so many repairs remain to be made to the house, with funding so difficult to come by, that he finds it “disheartening” to visit the property, although he lives ten minutes away; still, he stays involved with the house, “as much as I can.” He said that future plans include building a museum on the property, which would include space so that the offices currently occupying Annie’s former wing of the house could move. Regarding speculation that the separation of the spaces into apparently gendered realms revealed Russel’s non-heterosexuality, Joe countered that Russel’s intention was simply to have his own space to work; he added that Russel and Annie lived in the studio while the main house was being built. “When he designed it, he had no idea that he was going to have a life with me,” Joe said, implying that Russel was not even aware of his bisexuality at the time of the house’s design so could not have consciously incorporated it. When asked whether he himself would like their relationship to be interpreted at Manitoga, Joe had mixed feelings. Referencing the lack of Russel Wright biographies, he said, “But there are books about his work because that’s what he was known for: his work . . . I agree that it would be nice if [our relationship] were more public, but I just don’t want to distract from his work. They [at Manitoga] are documenting the house and his work. Not his life. Although that was his life: he loved working and creating. But they have enough to do.” He minimized his own importance in Russel’s life: “Remember, it was only twelve-and-a-half years.” However, he agreed that those years were significant in Russel’s life and concluded, on the subject of including their relationship
in the site’s interpretation, “I certainly want that.” For now, Joe’s place seems limited to the realm of tacit information. “Everyone involved in Manitoga and everyone in the community knows that I was his life partner. It just doesn’t seem to be a particular interest . . . They’ve never asked about my relationship with Russel. They know that it existed, but people aren’t much interested in other people’s lives.”

Of course, especially with such revered figures as Russel Wright, the latter statement is far from the truth. Despite the lack of a biography on Russel, Manitoga has access to an incredible resource, perhaps unusual for a house museum, in the memories of Annie and Joe. A report from the 2008 Annual Meeting of the staff noted, “Collections Database Curator Mimi Sherman interviewed Annie W and Joe Chapman to assemble provenance descriptions for collections objects.” More such work should be done, focusing not only on collections objects but also on the comprehensive artifact of the site itself, the lives that lived in it, and how the spaces were not only designed but also inhabited, especially because livability was so central to Russel’s philosophy. Stakeholders’ priorities and opinions are going to differ; stories are going to conflict; but when it can, interpretation should address memory as well as solid fact. The Manitoga staff is working exhaustively to preserve as much of Russel’s legacy as they can and to obtain resources so that this work can continue. The long list of priorities should at least include capturing more of the oral history of Annie and Joe, which would surely not weigh heavily on Manitoga’s budget constraints and would help to ensure that an image of Russel Wright the

27 Joe Chapman, Phone Interview, 30 March 2012.
man—including his second love—may find its place alongside that of Russel Wright the designer.
Conclusion

This thesis has explored the practical challenges of interpreting marginalized heritage through case studies that, together, generate and support theoretical conclusions. Antoinette J. Lee, one of the first scholars to focus on diversity in historic preservation, asserts that, “history is malleable: it can be rewritten, rethought, reinterpreted, reinvigorated, and resuscitated to illuminate contemporary challenges.”\(^1\) Although she does not address LGBT preservation, her exploration of the means by which the preservation field has been adjusted to include other minority groups provides useful precedents. For example, she discusses recommendations that federal preservation procedures shift to include not only specific historic properties but also the cultural environments valued by American Indians; she concludes that, “We should recognize that an enhanced understanding of cultural diversity may require an expanded or adjusted template.”\(^2\) This observation is fundamental to considering how best to preserve LGBT heritage, which needs to be rewritten—or in many cases written for the first time—to reflect a current understanding of its marginalized nature. According to David Lowenthal, all heritage is by nature fabrication; it “exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error.”\(^3\) Lowenthal draws a distinction between history and heritage in their capacity to be rewritten and in the communities privy to them: “Historians’ revisions must conform with accepted tenets of evidence. Heritage is more flexibly emended . . . History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and endurance,

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\(^2\) Lee 19.

endowing us alone with prestige and purpose.”⁴ According to this distinction, LGBT history is limited by its relative dearth of uncontroversial, straightforward evidence; social stigma often prevented the LGBT past from being recorded—or else kept the record from being preserved—especially before the watershed of the Stonewall Riots.

Preservationists are tasked with reconciling the need to further develop LGBT heritage, which is by its nature exclusive, with the need to incorporate it within a broadly inclusive American heritage that continues to be preserved. In doing so, they should keep in mind that they are not preserving history as Lowenthal defines it—the mere fact that Alice Austen shared her life with a woman named Gertrude Tate, for example—but rather heritage, by which history is interpreted. This heritage is a construct going beyond acknowledgment of Alice and Gertrude’s relationship, to include the fact that it has been labeled as “lesbian,” the contrast between this label and the house’s interpretation, and the consequential significance to the history of preservation itself. The Lesbian Avengers’ protest belongs to Clear Comfort’s heritage; the struggle to define Edna St. Vincent Millay’s personage is part of Steepletop’s heritage; the Calamus Preservation Society, the controversy regarding the nature of Eleanor Roosevelt’s relationships, and the conflicting memories of Russel Wright’s relatives, all contribute to the LGBT heritage embodied at preserved sites. The fabrication that Lowenthal describes can work in a place’s favor; according to Andrew Dolkart, coauthor of the 1999 nomination that resulted in Stonewall’s inclusion in the National Register, it was possible to prove the site’s national significance (a requirement for nomination since Stonewall did not meet the 50-year age limit otherwise necessary) because it “has developed to be a site of mythic importance,” with its legendary

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⁴ Lowenthal 7-8.
symbolic value among the LGBT community perhaps outreaching the impact that the Stonewall Riot itself had on the equality movement.\(^5\) As opposed to historical significance, heritage significance is not limited by the amount of existent evidence but has the potential to expand by spinning out of itself. It is worth noting that the Stonewall nomination also serves as an example of pushing the boundaries of preservation procedure to incorporate new forms of heritage. Because the authors lacked a prototype for the Stonewall site, which would include not only the Stonewall Inn but also certain streets where the action of the riot took place, they used the guidelines for civil war battlefields to frame the nomination.\(^6\) It is this type of innovative spirit that preservationists should adopt as they adjust the preservation template to allow for the peculiarities of LGBT heritage.

According to Paula Martinac, author of the first national guide to gay and lesbian historic sites, *The Queerest Places* (1998),

> When I was researching my book, I was struck by how many Americans who had made invaluable contributions to our culture and society have not been acknowledged as queer, even by their biographers. Mainstream historians and biographers have excused these omissions by claiming that homosexuality is not "relevant" to people’s accomplishments, and yet heterosexual behavior/activity is always included as a part of history/biography - the classic double standard.\(^7\)

The heteronormativity that Martinac points out, and the ways in which the sexuality lexicon has developed, highlight the fact that sexuality is as much a construct as the heritage it produces. As LGBT historian Gail Lee Dubrow postulates, “the power of gay and lesbian history ultimately may reside in its ability to reveal the ways in which heterosexuality is socially enforced and culturally constructed, a perspective that draws

\(^5\) Andrew Dolkart, Personal Interview, 1 Dec. 2010.
\(^6\) Dolkart, Interview.
\(^7\) Paula Martinac, Email Interview, 30 Nov. 2010.
attention away from gay and lesbian landmarks and, instead, brings a wide range of locations into focus.”⁸ In order for that broader revelation to take place, preservationists must first single out LGBT heritage because of its unique characteristics, then reinsert it, in a more fully developed state, into the wider American heritage. In Martinac's opinion, “In general, I think the same holds true for queer history as for women's history—that we have to first compartmentalize it and deal with it as a distinct entity, get people to recognize accomplishments through time and how sexual orientation impacted them, and then incorporate our history back into mainstream history.”⁹ There is much work to be done: a survey should be made of LGBT-related sites that have gone unrecognized by official preservation procedures, but those places that have already received landmark designation for other reasons, including the five sites that I have discussed, are “perhaps the most obvious places to begin remedying the omissions and distortions in the presentation of gay and lesbian history.”¹⁰ In presenting historical figures as significant to the LGBT community, preservationists usually must consider an element of uncertainty in whether the person was verifiably queer in affectational or sexual orientation, and in what terms he or she would have used to self-identify; this speculation, if honestly presented as such, has a definite place in significance.

Finding a means of incorporating a minority's heritage into the broader heritage protected by preservationists does not guarantee that the public will be receptive. For example, Ned Kaufman compares the success of “preservation's celebratory power” in

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⁹ Martinac, Interview.

¹⁰ Dubrow 286.
recovering history at the African Burial Ground in New York City, with the controversy over preserving the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, where the divisive figure Malcolm X was assassinated. Kaufman says,

> Correcting the historical record has its own rightness and is an important goal. Yet these two contrasting stories should give pause to those who argue that being included in the picture equates with empowerment. Heritage victories, unless accompanied by significant victories in the area of property values and political power, are likely to be essentially symbolic. When a preservation victory not only opens up the canon of heritage celebration but also changes the balance of wealth and power (even in a small way), then heritage politics will have achieved a real measure of empowerment.\(^\text{11}\)

While the potential of education is undoubtedly a central tenet of preservation, it might be naïve to believe that increased equality in preservationists’ attention translates to increased tolerance of a minority group by the general public; in fact, “the levers are more likely to work in the opposite direction.”\(^\text{12}\) Still, to underestimate the impact on public awareness would be to disregard the preservationist’s role in contributing to the construction of heritage. Laurajane Smith defines heritage as “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present.”\(^\text{13}\) As such, “all heritage is uncomfortable to someone, not only because any meaning or message about a heritage place may ‘disinherit’ someone else, but because heritage has a particular power to legitimize – or not – someone’s sense of place and thus their social and cultural experiences and memories.”\(^\text{14}\) The compartmentalization of heritage is by nature exclusionary; incorporating references to LGBT heritage into the

\(^{12}\) Kaufman 64.
\(^{14}\) Smith 81.
interpretation of historic sites will undoubtedly cause discomfort for those members of the public who remain unwilling to accept legitimizing the place of LGBT people in American history. This effect can be mitigated if preservationists include LGBT heritage in the broader American heritage—more accurately reflecting the current reality of a gradually more inclusive society—by first pursuing it on an exclusionary basis guided by its characteristic features: the conjecture of sexuality, relevance, and vocabulary. Not simply compartmentalizing minority heritage, preservationists should reinsert this heritage into the broader American story in a way that acknowledges that it—and all heritage—is a construct and significant as such. Preservationists have the unique power to bring LGBT issues to a broader public attention, while contributing to LGBT people’s communal sense of place-based cultural inheritance, by clarifying that they are not constructing history—an act that would necessitate the denial of conjecture—but, rather, writing heritage.
Appendix

Figure 1: Colonial Williamsburg slave auction
Featured in The Virginia Gazette,
http://www.vagazette.com/articles/2009/06/06/news/doc4a207a2ac492b596700578.txt

Figure 2: Display from Fred Wilson’s “Mining the Museum”
Figure 1: Clear Comfort
Photograph by Alice Austen, http://aliceausten.org/clear-comfort-1

Figure 2: Photograph by Alice Austen
Figure 3: The Lesbian Avengers

Figure 4: Dyke, A Quarterly
Figure 5: Gertrude identified as “Alice’s Lover”
Photograph by Alice Austen, featured in Dyke, A Quarterly
http://seesaw.typepad.com/dyke quarterly/people-alice-austen/

Figure 6: New Alice Austen House website (captions included)
http://aliceausten.org/her-life/
http://aliceausten.org/her-photography/
Figure 7: “Owning History” Photographs by Alice Austen and Steven Rosen, featured in Historic House Trust Newsletter (Fall 2010).

Figure 8: Steepletop Photograph by the author
Figure 9: Walt Whitman Birthplace
Photograph by the author

Figure 10: Whitman portrait wall
Photograph by the author
Figure 11: “To Celebrate the Need of Comrades”
Photograph by the author

Figure 12: Original panel on Whitman and love
Walt Whitman Birthplace and Interpretive Center Archives
Figure 13: Calamus Preservation Society
Photographs courtesy of David Robinson

Figure 14: Calamus Preservation Society’s “zap sheet” for NYC Pride
Courtesy of Stephen Shapiro

Don’t let NY State erase our history

Walt Whitman, America’s best-known poet, was gay. But the Walt Whitman Birthplace (in Huntington) treats Whitman’s homosexuality like a dirty secret. They quote none of his homoerotic poetry, ignore his loving and erotic relations with other men (or misrepresent them as ordinary friendship), and use evasive, ambiguous language – like “presumed heterosexuality” – to erase a central aspect of Whitman’s life and poetry.

Whitman championed equal rights for women, but he erotically desired only men. Whitman’s homoerotic desires are the source of the spiritual bond that connects men in his dream of democracy in America. The birthplace museum claims to celebrate this dream; instead they create disinformation, a campaign of falsification to serve a right-wing political agenda. Everyone who visits this NY State-funded educational center (especially schoolchildren) deserves to know the truth.

Don’t let New York State closet Walt!
Help Keep Up the Pressure (turn over)
Figure 15: Calamus Preservation Society’s “zap sheet” for Huntington Pride
Courtesy of Stephen Shapiro

Homophobia in Huntington at the Walt Whitman Birthplace

You won't find these words at this “shrine” to gay desire homosexual

queen

The time for half-truths and evasions is over!

Don't let New York State closet Walt!

To get involved, call The Calamus Preservation Society – 117/902-0727

Figure 16: Val-Kill
Photograph by the author
Figure 17: Manitoga
Photograph by the author

Figure 18: Russel Wright’s studio and bedroom
Photograph by the author
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