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Erin Carlson Mast, Morris J. Vogel, Lisa Lopez

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Stepping into the Future at Historic Sites



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The Period of Significance Is Now

CONTRIBUTORS: ERIN CARLSON MAST, MORRIS J. VOGEL AND LISA LOPEZ

In Washington, D.C., at President Lincoln's Cottage, students from all over the world gather during summer for a two-day summit to discuss slavery. But not slavery as it existed during Lincoln's time, slavery as it exists today.

In Chicago at the Jane Addams Hull-House, museum visitors are asked to take part in actions that bring attention to prisoners in solitary confinement and demand that the human rights of prisoners be recognized by lawmakers.

In New York, attendees at a Tenement Talk sponsored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum hear about current issues of economic inequality from journalist Sasha Abramsky, author of [The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives](#), a gripping book that gives voice to those who have been passed over by the wave of American affluence, and those most recently hit by the economic downturn.



In the *Can You Walk Away?* exhibit at President Lincoln's Cottage, disturbing stories that document modern-day slavery in America highlighted the ongoing relevance of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which he began formulating here.

PHOTO COURTESY HOWARD + REVIS ©, COURTESY PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S COTTAGE

What is happening here? These events may take place at historic house museums, but they embrace history as it is happening today. The period of significance for these sites is now—not 50 or 150 years ago.

Today, a number of historic house museums have realized that they have a role to play in addressing present-day concerns. They know that the stories they tell about “back then” are still relevant today, and that this history can form a basis for addressing and understanding social justice issues and current events. These museums are playing an innovative role in helping today’s visitors understand that challenges faced by people a century or two centuries ago are still relevant in today’s world.

We interviewed the directors of three sites to find out what is behind these new directions and programming. You will hear from Erin Carlson Mast, executive director of [President Lincoln’s Cottage at the Soldiers Home](#) in Washington, D.C.; Morris J. Vogel, president of the [Lower East Side Tenement Museum](#) in New York; and Lisa Lopez, interim director at the [Jane Addams Hull-House Museum](#) in Chicago.

When you think about the phrase “the period of significance is now,” particularly in terms of the programmatic opportunities, how do you interpret this?

MAST: We think of this in two, very specific ways. First, the National Monument designation of President Lincoln’s Cottage highlighted the ideas President Lincoln dealt with here during the Civil War. Those ideas continue to evolve and be focal points in our world today. Second, we are situated in a landscape that has served the same purpose since before Lincoln’s time here, and we interpret this place as living and evolving. This site isn’t frozen in time; it’s part of an unbroken arc of history. Part of the landscape is a national cemetery that is the predecessor of Arlington National Cemetery, and, like Arlington, is still an active cemetery. It has a rolling period of significance, because each burial adds to its history. And the Armed Forces Retirement Home campus continues to serve as a home for retired and disabled veterans. We interpret the evolution of Lincoln’s thinking and the impact of his



At the Students Opposing Slavery summit held at President Lincoln's Cottage last year, 35 students from six countries were mobilized to join the modern abolitionist movement.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S COTTAGE

ideas throughout time and in our world today, in a landscape that honors and respects its own history while embracing necessary change.

VOGEL: History is a conversation that the present holds with the past in order to help chart its course for the future. That's how I always introduced the discipline in my 30 years of teaching. Done with purpose, preservation, like history, is much more than a mere record of the past or an accounting of what it has left behind. Surviving structures and spaces are gifts; they allow us, in our own time, to summon up the struggles and choices, the truths and values that past generations confronted and drew on in building lives, families and communities. It's a tremendous opportunity—and responsibility—for the Tenement Museum to interpret this usable past, this guide to the present and the future, in its programs.

LOPEZ: This phrase reminds me that when historic house museums are entirely focused on the past, they can lose sight of their value in contemporary society. Historic houses not only allow visitors to immerse themselves in the past, they also provide interpretation that makes history relevant to our present moment. This is an incredible asset in what is largely a historical culture. Americans love the stories of our collective past, yet the lessons they hold for us can be elusive. Historic house museums have the potential to shed light on our history to yield new insights about the American experience.

At the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, our staff works to bring past and present into dialogue. For us, “the period of signifi-

cance is now” is not a dismissal of our history; rather it calls us to consider the site’s legacy. We ask: “How do the lives of Jane Addams and other Progressive-era social reformers help us to understand movement-building today?” “What did solidarity look like between Hull-House residents and their working-class immigrant neighbors?” “What do Hull-House’s successes and failures teach us in our contemporary struggles?” This history is an inheritance that we share to enrich the work of those working for social justice today.



Participants at the Students Opposing Slavery summit explore ways to raise awareness of modern slavery through social media.

PHOTO: COURTESY PRESIDENT LINCOLN’S COTTAGE

How has your programming evolved to address current issues such as human rights, immigration and social justice?

MAST: Since opening in 2008, President Lincoln’s Cottage has been focused on the people, events and ideas that resulted in the National Monument designation for this site. We recognized from the start—as did our visitors—that Lincoln was a remarkably modern president. His ideas and his words continue to be evoked by people from all walks of life, all over the world. Here you have a president who continues to draw intense reactions from people. He is hated by some, loved by many. He has been popular among groups as diametrically opposed as capitalists and communists. We have always encouraged visitors to make their own connections and parallels with other points in history. We were reluctant at first to talk about specific issues that were or are the modern successors to ideas Lincoln dealt with in his time, because making one-to-one comparisons can be problematic. We weren’t interested in comparisons so much as showing the evolution of ideas.

Two situations collided to prompt us to deal with current issues more directly. First, the Civil War Sesquicentennial provided an ideal opportunity to look at how our nation had evolved on the

issue of slavery since Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment. Second, the issue of modern slavery was gaining more attention in this country, but the breadth and depth of the domestic problem wasn’t well known. It was common for us to hear visitors say, “I’m so glad we don’t have slavery in our country anymore.” Knowing slavery was and is a problem right here in the nation’s capital, 150 years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and nearly 150 years after the 13th Amendment, prompted us to finally address the issue here at President Lincoln’s Cottage. It is bad history to imply that slavery ended with the Emancipation Proclamation or the 13th Amendment or any other legal action. Just because something is illegal doesn’t mean it disappears. Rationally we know that, but it wasn’t until we looked at the issue that we recognized there was so little awareness about the prevalence of slavery in our society today. We couldn’t just tell people that slavery has continued, we had to provide more information and empower people to confront these issues.

VOGEL: The Tenement Museum was established to integrate past and present in its programming. That’s not new for us. The museum connected past and present for much of its 26 years by emphasizing social history—that is, the stories of ordinary people and everyday life. Social history continues to figure importantly in the museum’s work; too few cultural institutions appreciate the achievement represented in creating families, educating children, building cities and



The Lower East Side Tenement Museum employs an authentic New York tenement building to present the stories of immigrant families from Europe who settled in such places in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Its newly acquired building, pictured here, will provide an appropriate setting for exploring the experiences of more-recent newcomers from Asia, Latin America and Africa.



The Hull-House Museum continues to be a site associated with social justice issues. Museum staff are exploring new forms of advocacy and action by positioning the museum as an ally in social movements.

PHOTO BY LAUREN MERANDA, COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN AND THE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO. HISTORICAL PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HULL-HOUSE MUSEUM

planning for better futures. In recent years, the museum has come to focus more deliberately on immigration and identity, past and present, on the ways in which immigrants have continually defined and redefined the nation, shaping who we are and what we value as a people. We have been interpreting the stories of families who arrived on the Lower East Side during the great waves of 19th- and early-20th-century European immigration, and showing how those stories have bearing for today's immigrations.

We are embarking now on an ambitious new interpretation that will carry the immigration story into the recent past, into the period when the major sources of American immigration shifted away from Europe and to Asia, Latin America and Africa. This new exhibit will let us tell the story of present-day America in the same kind of immersive environments—and with the same interpretive power—that we have devoted to European immigrations.

LOPEZ: The Hull-House Museum was historically a site of social justice, with reformers working to achieve rights for immigrants, women and workers; peace; and healthy neighborhoods, so it wasn't much of a leap to consider how the museum's programming might consider similar issues today. Our evolution has more to do with a shift in thinking about how museums can affect social change. We have long offered educational programming on contemporary issues, but we are beginning to explore new forms of advocacy and action by positioning the museum as an ally in social movements.

Recently our exhibitions have highlighted contemporary community organizers such as the Chicago Coalition for Household Workers, which is fighting for minimum wage laws to be extended to domestic workers in Illinois. We also have asked museum visitors to take part in actions that bring attention to prisoners in solitary confinement and demand that the human rights of prisoners be recognized by lawmakers. This year we are working with restorative justice groups throughout the city of Chicago to determine what it means to be a peace museum within a city that witnesses upward of 500 murders per year. We believe that our museum can play a role in decreasing the violence in our city. Though our staff may not be the ones working on the ground, we can amplify the voices of those workers and of the youth of color who are bearing the brunt of this violence. We can work to change the conversation about violence so that these youth are not demonized. And we can use our history as a springboard to consider the many methods and histories of peace-building within our city.

The museum staff has long desired for our site to again be at the center of social justice activism in Chicago. The site has always been use by historians interested in movement-building, but the shift to engage artists, activists and policymakers brought new energy to our work. Hull-House was always a site of praxis—the process by which theory is enacted in real situations—and the museum seeks to maintain this commitment to both thinking and action.

Has this programming attracted new audiences?

If so who?

MAST: Our expertise is in history and education. So before developing new exhibits and programs we had to find advisors. We found our other half in Polaris Project, a leading anti-human trafficking NGO based right here in D.C. They provided content and guidance on an exhibit, our largest effort dealing directly with modern slavery in the context of the history of what happened here at the Cottage. The exhibit “Can You Walk Away?” looks at modern slavery in the U.S. 150 years after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

We're also gearing up to host our second-annual Students Opposing Slavery international summit. Last year's summit brought 35 students from six different countries to President Lincoln's Cottage. These two efforts along with our other work have led to new partnerships, and new audiences, especially within the modern abolitionist movement. It has become a wonderful symbiotic thing. We can't be all things to all people, but we can do this in an authentic place and in an authentic way.

VOGEL: Audiences have continued to grow as museum capacity has grown, so it's not clear that there is a direct correlation between program focus and attendance. We do know that word-of-mouth (as revealed in *Trip Advisor* and the like), on which the museum depends on for its marketing, is extremely positive and attuned to program quality and salience. The new exhibit will add further capacity, and it will allow the 50,000 students, most from NYC public schools, who already attend the museum to see an immigration story that resembles their own.

LOPEZ: Our programming has attracted audiences that might never have visited the museum otherwise. These include young people, community organizers, and people asking important questions about social justice in Chicago today. We have more work to do in terms of audience cultivation though, as the museum has developed two strong, but largely separate audiences. The museum's exhibitions mostly attract people interested in Progressive-era history, while the museum's public programs attract a crowd interested in contemporary social justice issues. Our staff is currently brainstorming how to bring these communities together for meaningful dialogue.

Any advice for other historic sites looking to expand their period of significance to today?

MAST: There is no clear roadmap to discovering or rediscovering your present-day significance. You might simply stay attuned to your senses, the history, and perennial issues in your community, and one day something will come into focus. Or you could try to sort it out more methodically, by looking at what made your site unique and worth saving in the first place. Then explore how those

themes or ideas are still playing out in your local, regional or larger community today.

VOGEL: Tell important stories that matter to your audiences and to the broader public. Help visitors understand the issues for which they bear responsibility as citizens.

LOPEZ: Consider your site’s unique strengths and determine what community needs that the site can address. The late 1800s home of an industrialist would make an interesting setting for conversations about income disparities today or to examine the role of worker’s unions within the contemporary labor movement. [FJ](#)



TAKEAWAY

For work sheet to get you started on rethinking the period of significance for your site, [click here](#).



SLIDESHOW

The Period of Significance Is Now.