

This Old Alley: Memory, Preservation, and Commemoration On Elfreth's Alley

Alexander Bethke
History
Villanova University

In 1940, amidst the surge of preservation and restoration along a small, unknown alley, a reporter cried out to his readers, "So God save Elfreth's Alley." For generations since, this place has come to represent the early, non-commercialized, quaint days of Philadelphia as it was when the British governed the colony. In the twentieth century, the sight of Elfreth's Alley, as one reporter observed, is a "delight to the eyes that have become wearied with looking upon constantly changing signs of modern progress."¹

Rudyard Kipling lamented this vanished sense of colonial innocence that has since been replaced by modernity. The author may have never visited Philadelphia, but his imagination mourned the destruction of the city's colonial landmarks. His writings of Philadelphia in 1910 were part of a larger belief that the evolution of civilization had strayed from its democratic fathers. Kipling's historical imagination thrived in the conviction that this great civilization could only survive if future generations met the challenges posed by modernization. He was astonished to learn that one tract of land, between Second and Front, north of Arch Street, in the heart of Colonial Philadelphia, remained a preserved remnant of an unspoiled bygone period that had played such a prominent role in American history. Of this place he wrote:

If you're off to Philadelphia in the morning,
You mustn't take my stories for a guide;
There's little left, indeed, of the city you will read of
And all the folks I write about have died ...

The cats sleep on and the children play,
The pigeons strut in the narrow way,
Even the same as yesterday
Ever the same tomorrow.²

¹ Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, Newspaper Clipping Collection, "Down Our Alley," 10 June 1940. Philadelphia, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives. (Hereafter, Urban Archives); Urban Archives, "The Artist of Elfreth's Alley," 6 October 1946; Urban Archives, "Men and Things," 29 August 1932.

As Kipling immortalized Elfreth's Alley's famed tradition of being the nation's oldest unchanged residential street, the Elfreth's Alley Association has successfully used public memory to continue this legacy through preservation and education. As the Alley remains the best surviving example of colonial Philadelphia, historic preservation and restoration have played the most integral part of Elfreth's Alley's continued tradition.³ Although preservation restored the physical character of the Alley to its colonial days, commemoration has been vital in preserving its living character. Special events have been essential factors in the Alley's funding and public relations, while the Elfreth's Alley Museum takes a more traditional approach to educating the public.

Preservation and commemoration are two avenues that have enjoyed tremendous popularity and accomplishment in advancing the mission of the Association. But this success has come at a price, compromising and romanticizing Elfreth's Alley's three hundred year history. "Fete Days" and "Deck the Alley" have served to feed embellished history into the minds of unsuspecting Philadelphians while the Association's curatorial work has failed to incorporate a substantial scholarly narrative for its visitors. Nevertheless, this interpretive education is being restructured as the Alley currently experiences a developmental and administrative transition that promises to produce success in the future. Regardless of the museum's questionable achievements, no visit to Philadelphia would be complete without a stop at Elfreth's Alley.

Elfreth's Alley: the Myth, the Legend

A visitor might ask, why all this commotion over a small alley lodged in the middle of an otherwise historically rich downtown? For a common street, Elfreth's Alley bears an impressive history, tradition, and legend. For seven decades, accounts have been told and retold by reporters and authors, conflicting in detail, further leaving an accurate historical account to become legend. Its true history is not what visitors travel from around the world to see. Rather, they flock to experience what they perceive to be a slice of eighteenth century life. The Alley's historical details are not as important as its symbolism within the context of this history in the public memory. In order to appreciate the attraction to Elfreth's Alley by preservationists and tourists, its historical lore must be understood.

² J.I.M. Stewart, *Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1966), 147; Urban Archives, "Street of Many Memories," 29 May 1949.

³ Roger W. Moss, *Historic Houses of Philadelphia: A Tour of the Region's Museum's Homes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 24, 26; U.S. Department of the Interior. *The National Register of Historic Places: 1969* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 249.

Philadelphia was founded by William Penn in 1681. At this time, the fledgling city was not much more than a frontier settlement. By 1775, it had grown to become the second largest British city in the world, but compared with today's standards, the city was drastically smaller and more intimate.⁴ In 1690, a small alley opened between Second and Front Streets to provide a 'way through' for accessibility to a blacksmith shop, mill, and the Delaware River on Front Street.⁵ The first owners of this alley were John Gilbert and Arthur Wells. In 1703, William Penn deeded the south side of the Alley to Wells and the north side to Gilbert. As a result, this alley's first name became Gilbert's Alley.⁶

Gilbert's Alley, however, is not the name this nation has come to know. Jeremiah and Josiah Elfreth were two English brothers who came to Philadelphia in 1683. A nephew of Jeremiah, married the eldest daughter of John Gilbert, thereby acquiring land in Gilbert's Alley. A son of Josiah settled on the corner in 1740 and eventually Jeremiah owned all the property along the Alley and the name was changed around 1750. According to the Register of Wills, he died in 1772.⁷

The Elfreths provide an insightful look into eighteenth century economics. At this time, working class citizens - artisans such as carpenters, printers, and craftsmen as well as mariners, river pilots, and shipwrights - could not afford to own their own property. A few lucky workers could though, like Jeremiah Elfreth and John Gilbert, who became real estate entrepreneurs. These men charged rent and used this income to reinvest in the land. For example, #126 was built by Jeremiah as an investment property and later sold. Of thirty three current houses along the Alley, only twenty or so had been built by the mid-1700s.⁸

While Elfreth's Alley takes pride in its common history, it does not hesitate to mention the names of important citizens who have also been identified with the Alley. These celebrities did not create the Alley's charm or character, but added to its mystique and diversity. Among the visitors to the Alley as children were Dolly

⁴ By 1700, the population of Philadelphia reached just over 2000. In 1765, its population had swelled to 25,000, fourth only to London, Dublin, and Edinburgh. Nearly three hundred years later, in 2001, the city's population reached 1,478,002. (Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1982), 10, 79. Mapquest.com, Road Atlas: United States, Canada, Mexico, 2001 ed. (2001), 140.)

⁵ At the time, N. Second Street was one of the major thoroughfares in Philadelphia, making Elfreth's Alley not only a side thoroughway, but a heavily trafficked area. (Urban Archives, "Men and Things.")

⁶ Weigley, 11; Urban Archives, "Venerable Elfreth Alley Is Like A Corner of Southern France," 7 June 1935; Urban Archives, "'After All, This Is Elfreth's Alley'," 31 May 1974; Richard J. Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 52; Urban Archives, "Lively Relic of Old Philadelphia," 26 April 1964.

⁷ Urban Archives, "Lively Relic;" Urban Archives, "Street of Many Memories;" Urban Archives, "Elfreth Alley Colonial Street 200 Years Old," 22 June 1936; Webster, 52; Urban Archives, "After All;" Urban Archives, "Answers to Queries," 11 January 1961.

⁸ Webster, 52; John Francis Marion, *Bicentennial City: Walking Tours of Historic Philadelphia* (Princeton, NJ: The Pyne Press, 1974), 23; Moss, 28.

Madison and Betsy Ross.⁹ Its list of inhabitants though is much more remarkable. Stephen Girard, financier of the Revolution, lived at #111. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand supposedly sought refuge during the French Revolution in the small Alley. At #132 lived Philip Syng and Jemima Wilkinson was stoned by Alley residents.¹⁰ It was also at the corner bar of Gilbert's Alley that William Penn's son reportedly became drunk for which he was scolded by his father and sent back to England. Most legendary, Ben Franklin was rumored to have stayed at #108 shortly after coming from Boston, but this story is not certain.¹¹

Two main ideas can be gathered from the Alley's story to generate an appreciation of its importance in modern culture. Overall, the Alley is a living representation of what Philadelphia looked like during its infancy. Among the four earliest housing periods in Philadelphia, the first were simple caves along the edge of the Delaware River and the second were mostly makeshift abodes. Elfreth's Alley, meanwhile, is representative of the third phase.¹² Alley residents, and more importantly, its founders dating back to John Gilbert, were among Philadelphia's first citizens in the 1680s. For many Philadelphians, this most primitive history eludes common knowledge. It is a story of Philadelphia that is much different from the more publicized Colonial or Revolutionary Era and is difficult to comprehend in light of the sprawling city we know today. This history simply does not have a popular or viable voice to educate the public and so, has been largely overlooked.

Elfreth's Alley is also an outstanding display of diversity. For the most part, its residents have always been ordinary citizens. Yet living in their midst were American fathers and revolutionaries. The common folk among the powerful is exemplary of equality and the modern American Dream.¹³ History has been made at Elfreth's Alley for the past three hundred years and continues to be made there today; the story of the Alley cannot be limited to the eighteenth century. As a continuously inhabited street, historians and the public must remember that many generations have lived among the spirits of the founding fathers in William Penn's Philadelphia.

⁹ Betsy Griscom (Ross), supposedly attended Miss Rebecca Jones' school, which was held in Bladen's Court. (Urban Archives, "Lively Relic.")

¹⁰ Philip Syng, a friend of Ben Franklin and local silversmith, cast the inkstands that would eventually be used in the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Jemima Wilkinson was an early feminist. She was stoned by residents of the Alley for inciting a riot, wearing men's clothes, and preaching that she had died, but returned to spread the gospel of feminism. (Weigley, 96-7; Urban Archives, "Street of Many Memories.")

¹¹ Urban Archives, "Lively Relic;" Urban Archives, "Street of Many Memories." Urban Archives, "Oldest Street In U.S., Elfreth's Alley Has Houses Built Over 200 Years Ago," 21 June 1936.

¹² American Philosophical Society, *Historic Philadelphia From the Founding Until the Early Nineteenth Century: Papers Dealing With Its People and Buildings* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953), 282.

¹³ While the 'American Dream' is a relatively modern ideological creation, this is the manner in which preservationists and tourists have viewed the Alley over the past seven decades.

Preserving a National Treasure

After Jeremiah Elfreth died in 1772, the Alley seemed to be forgotten by Philadelphians for almost one hundred and fifty years. Most Philadelphians had completely passed it out of memory except those who lived there. Over time, its history faded into legend until it was rediscovered in 1932.¹⁴ It is remarkable, then, that a small group of residents still remembered their past when a local business planned to demolish three houses. Indeed, a lot had changed since those days of legend, but the glory days of Elfreth's Alley as its residents had imagined it, lived in their memory.

The Battle Begins, 1933-1940

The commencement of Elfreth's Alley's long struggle to retain its presence, heritage, and character despite the encroachment of the modern world was concomitant to the general feelings toward preservation at the time. Just as the national preservation movement thrived during the Great Depression, so did the Elfreth's Alley Association. Like most other organizations, this Association was a local women's garden and tea club that tied ambitious resolution towards building and heritage preservation. Elfreth's Alley was unique in that it typified the transition from an individual site emphasis to a concern for the complete neighborhood and its encompassing environment. The Association strove to keep the past alive as a living entity while adjusting to the changes of the surrounding communities. This form of preservation had seen similar success in Charlestown, SC and Williamsburg, VA, but these larger and better funded cases did not sprout from citizen's awareness on a localized level.¹⁵

Elfreth's Alley as it stands today is the result of a grassroots preservation effort by its residents. The preservation of the Alley had always been entrusted to its residents and under their care, had managed to survive intact for two hundred years. In 1934, residents united to form the Elfreth's Alley Association, now one of the oldest preservation groups in the city. The Association was formed in large part because of Mrs. D.W. Ottey who opened a tea-room, "the Hearthstone," at #115 and championed the Alley's cause. At the time, a local paint manufacturer planned to substitute warehouses for many of these historic structures, causing an uproar among concerned residents.¹⁶ Ottey wrote a letter to the Evening Bulletin seeking help for the small Alley's fight against this large commercial institution. Her words

¹⁴ Urban Archives, "Men and Things;" Urban Archives, "Venerable Elfreth Alley."

¹⁵ Robert E. Stipe, ed., *A Richer Heritage: Historic Preservation In the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7-8; William J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation In America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1997), 38.

¹⁶ Urban Archives, "Oldest Street In U.S.;" Urban Archives, "Elfreth Alley Homes Are Saved," 19 February 1937.

attracted the interest of a larger preservation powerhouse; the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, the city's leading force in restoration work at the time, answered the Alley's call for help. The publicity and support that the Society lent to this cause proved a powerful ally. In 1937, Mayor S. Davis Wilson guaranteed financial support from the City to save the Alley, thus ending its threatened situation. As the Mayor remarked, this site was "too precious a heritage for the city to allow them to be torn down."¹⁷

Where other large restoration projects evolved from large corporate or governmental interests, Elfreth's Alley survived because of local pride. As was the case two hundred years prior, the residents in Elfreth's Alley were commoners. In the thirties, many outsiders labeled the Alley a slum. But these Philadelphians were like many other citizens at the time ... they were teamsters, factory and office workers often living in cramped quarters with other families. What was special about these particular residents, however, were their personalities, self-respecting outlook, and keen sense of historical awareness. They proved that preservation and pride in the past was just as pertinent in commercially dilapidated areas as it was in wealthier neighborhoods. Pride in their history inspired businesses like Ingle Brothers and residents like Mrs. Thomas Greer to drive the effort to protect this "bit of original Philadelphia that has been preserved for the past two centuries."¹⁸

The question must be asked, why did lower class citizens care about tiny Elfreth's Alley during the Great Depression? In the 1930s, Philadelphia had multiplied in population, business, and modernity.¹⁹ The first vestiges of a modern corporate America with its high rise office buildings were beginning to dominate a historically quaint center city. Carriages could no longer be heard along Second Street. Instead, the Frankford Elevated Line bustled along Market Street, traffic lined the recently opened Ben Franklin Bridge, and storehouses, wholesalers, industrial plants, and warehouses had surrounded the antique Alley. Among the smog of congestion, Elfreth's Alley, then called Cherry Street, retained an air of tranquility as time seemingly stopped along this byway.²⁰ In this setting, historic preservation came to life for Elfreth's Alley and the City of Philadelphia, but its origin tells of an earlier age.

¹⁷ Urban Archives, "Venerable Elfreth Alley;" Urban Archives, "Dear Sir;" Urban Archives, "Oldest Street In U.S.;" Urban Archives, "Residents of Quaint Old Colonial Street Fight to Keep House," 26 June 1938; Urban Archives, "Elfreth Alley Homes Are Saved."

¹⁸ Urban Archives, "Oldest Street In U.S.;" Urban Archives, "Men and Things;" Marion, 30; Urban Archives, "Dear Sir;" Urban Archives, "Elfreth Alley Homes Are Saved."

¹⁹ In 1930, the city's population had swelled to 1,950,961. (Weigley, 602.)

²⁰ Urban Archives, "Answers to Queries," 26 September 1958; Urban archives, "After All;" Urban Archives, "Lively Relic." The Alley has undergone numerous name changes. In the early 1700s, it was known as Preston's Alley, after Paul Preston who married into the Gilbert family. Around 1750, the name was changed to Elfreth's Alley. Then again in 1897, the name was changed by the City to Cherry Street. (Ibid.)

In the 1920s, the nation experienced great economic growth, prosperity, and construction. During this decade, transit took priority to bring workers and shoppers into downtown. In this midst, the Delaware River Bridge (later renamed the Benjamin Franklin Bridge) was built as the longest suspension bridge in the world. The bridge crosses the Delaware River from just above Race Street with its approach running as far west as Fifth Street.²¹ Consideration for the history of affected properties was not given prior to design. After the bridge was approved, any interfering site was condemned and demolished.²² While historians do not know for certain, the destroyed properties could have been important sites similar to Elfreth's Alley. Prior destruction of similar homes may have inspired Elfreth's Alley residents to fight demolition in the mid-1930s.

The 1920s were also a decade characterized by the wish for simplicity and search of Americana. In this era, many others besides Kipling lamented a lack of tradition, community, and as Van Wyck Brooks complained, a sense of "'sympathetic soil' that could nourish the growth of cultural traditions."²³ Elfreth's Alley represented this quintessential American tradition as seen through the memory of the people and was preserved to do the same for future generations.

Across the nation, the Great Depression ushered in a focus on more socialist ideologies. Under Hoover, in the late 1920s, government's role was expressed through laissez-faire. This was an age of individualism that emphasized corporate creativity, hard work, and disassociation with external affairs. As the economic world plunged into chaos, Americans needed hope and comfort, which they would find in a new President and a New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt brought a nation devoid of dignity into a mindset that promised to protect the poor from the evils and greed of corporations. The America of the 1930s saw a contrast in methods, from President Hoover who restrained from using government action to a President who took action into his own hands. Under this leadership, the founders of the Elfreth's Alley Association found their inspiration for engagement.²⁴

With FDR's progressive notions that America should be governed as a commonwealth of equality, he continued the identity of this nation as a city on the

²¹ The bridge's approach is located only two blocks to the north of Elfreth's Alley. The Frankford Elevated Line was another major project changing the surrounding environment, located four blocks to the south of the Alley.

²² Walter S. Andariese, *History of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge* (Camden, NJ: Delaware River Port Authority, 1981), 6.

²³ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition In American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 306, 308.

²⁴ Zachary Karabell, *A Visionary Nation: Four Centuries of American Dreams and What Lies Ahead* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 84, 88, 93.

hill.²⁵ During hard times, citizens need hope and faith more than any governmental policy. Residents of Elfreth's Alley found their hope in the legends of their homes. They were urged on by the Alley's legendary past of equality, democracy, diversity, and overall by its general image of happiness. This happiness had transcended time and resonated with residents in the 1930s to become an inflated memory of the Alley's history, a city on the hill. Most legends are created in this manner and serve a heroically useful purpose, just as Elfreth's Alley did for its residents.

Following this early period of actively narrow-minded preservation efforts, Elfreth's Alley became a better known historic site. Its resume soon included a Pennsylvania Historical Commission certification in 1956, inclusion on the National Register of Historic Landmarks in 1963, and the Pennsylvania Register in 1970. As the Alley became more popular with Philadelphians and tourists, it became one of America's most treasured and admired urban fragments and a vital part in Philadelphia's back-to-city movement.²⁶

As the federal government began to invest large sums into restoring Old Philadelphia's historic houses in preparation for the Bicentennial in 1976, real estate developers looked to urban renewal as a goldmine. The success of Society Hill's development served as a model for the use of preservation in other parts of the city.²⁷ As homes that were a century or more old became refurbished, residents that had moved to the suburbs found historical living suddenly fashionable, quaint, and adorable. As real estate investments became intertwined with historic sites, history became a changing variable that was negotiable or even dependent on popular trends.

Elfreth's Alley was not unaffected by this movement. As the Bicentennial approached, Elfreth's Alley received a 250,000 dollar restoration face-lift. The completed project enhanced the Alley's eighteenth century feel by replacing the nineteenth century Belgian Block paving with a more authentic eighteenth century cobblestone surface.²⁸

Yet in 1977, Elfreth's Alley was affected by development when Seymour Millstein planned to build a community of eighteen town homes at the corner of Front Street and Elfreth's Alley. Residents complained bitterly that new housing would "limit open space, cut off fire equipment access, increase population density, and [possibly damage foundations]." The Elfreth's Alley Association

²⁵ Ibid, 88.

²⁶ Webster, 70; David Hamer, *History In Urban Places: The Historic Districts of the United States* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 17.

²⁷ Weigley, 720.

²⁸ Urban Archives, "Elfreth's Alley to Get Face-Lift With Cobblestones," 25 September 1974; Urban Archives, "Elfreth's Alley Face-Lifting Approved," 21 November 1974.

made several pleas to the zoning board, but like other historic areas in the city, Elfreth's Alley lost to the interests of investment. Today, Appletree Court stands paradoxically among these ancient remnants of Old Philadelphia.²⁹

Commemorating Colonial Life

With its mission to preserve firmly established, the Elfreth's Alley Association must also strive to educate as it does through annual events and museum education. As the United States transitioned from an industrial to a service-based economy in the post-war environment, knowledge and the search for meaning became important to the intellectual satisfaction of workers.³⁰ Today, the Alley continues to make history and build tradition with its annual special events that function to commemorate the lost character of colonial Philadelphia. Since the 1980s, two events have been held annually by the Association. Elfreth's Alley's "Fete Days" and "Deck the Alley" are important for their educational and public outreach efforts, but are also responsible for twenty-five percent of the Association's annual budget. These events are by far the most effective and popular programs that Elfreth's Alley organizes, attracting huge numbers of attendees to experience a romanticized piece of Old Philadelphia.

"Fete Days", which used to be called "Elfreth's Alley Day," is an event that originated in conjunction with the Association's preservation efforts. The first "Elfreth's Alley Day" was held in 1934 to rally the public to the Alley's aid. The tradition began as an open house into the private homes of Alley residents and a social event to rally and instill Philadelphians with pride about their colonial heritage. Like 1934, when Mrs. Ottey served tea and lunch in Bladen's Court, recent "Fete Days" have often included similar social aspects.³¹ This simple event was used to publicize the Alley in a fun and entertaining manner. Later, these events tried to incorporate an educational aspect to their event, including costumed interpreters to teach visitors about colonial life and the Alley.

From these early beginnings, "Fete Days" quickly grew into an event that attracted thousands of visitors by the 1940s. Where the 1920s saw the corporate buildup of national meaning and memory by Ford, Heinz, and Rockefeller, the 1930s emphasized a more local and regional mindset of which Elfreth's Alley took part. In the thirties, a strong sense of American patriotism and place of pride

²⁹ Urban Archives, "Elfreth's Alley Plea Rejected," 25 September 1977.

³⁰ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning From Museums: Visitor Expectations and the Making of Meaning* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2000), 1.

³¹ Urban Archives, "Colonial History to Be Set to Music Here Today As Famed Elfreth Alley Celebrates 'At Home'," 8 June 1985; Urban Archives, "Society Holds Luncheon," 15 June 1935.

dictated the meaning of museums to early visitors, creating memorials to American culture and heritage, similar to Elfreth's Alley.³²

The primary attraction to visitors, who attend these special events, is being allowed to view these treasures from the inside. By the 1930s, nearly every house had been modernized in terms of plumbing and electricity. Yet almost all of them retained some or all of their original wood structure and paneling, some featuring original fireplaces and woodworking as well. These may be the only original features that noticeably stand out when visitors tour the modern adaptations of these three hundred year old homes. Many homes have been refitted in modern decor while others have mixed different period furniture. Most of the historical flavoring and character that a visitor feels on the exterior is thoroughly diminished by their tour of their modern interiors. Thus, non-residents should not be fooled by these quaint, theatrical, colonial facades, for present residents now live with modern appliances that make fireplace heat or well water a thing of the past. Pamela Carter, an interior decorator by trade, relinquished her method of decorating her 'colonial' home from the mid 1970s:

We tried to be true to the Federal Period ... a period of great elegance when social gatherings were held in townhouses, furnished in English and French furniture; windows were draped with silken swag fabrics and accessories were treasures brought back on sailing trips....

... I don't want to be living in an antique home, but I like living with antiques."³³

Visitors must be reminded as they tour these homes that residents are not historians and their homes may not accurately represent the true period and class décor of colonial America.

In the street, residents or volunteer lay Philadelphians have also traditionally donned colonial costumes to play the part of eighteenth century residents or passersby. These actors were responsible for answering historical questions and interpreting colonial life, but may not necessarily have had historical training. Residents of all ages became part of the act. Children dance a minuet while older women become hostesses in their own homes, ready to welcome visitors through a two hundred year portal into Old Philadelphia. In a recent interview with Executive Director, Beth Richards, I was told residents no longer played an interpretive role in annual events, but that professional guides were hired to educate the public more

³² Kammen, 306.

³³ Urban Archives, "Modern Living On Historic Elfreth's Alley," 26 September 1974; Urban Archives, "Colonial History to be Set;" Urban Archives, "Oldest Street In U.S.;" Urban Archives, "Elfreth Alley Is Host," 7 June 1941. Not only is the Federal Period later than the era which the Elfreth's Alley Association focuses on, but these homes would not have been included in the elegance of the upper classes as Miss Carter has insinuated.

accurately. During the past “Deck the Alley” celebration, however, not only were many residents present to greet and answer question in their homes, but any staff on hand were volunteers. If earlier practices have changed, they are not easy to recognize.³⁴

Elfreth’s Alley homes are unique and enjoyable in their own right as the nation’s oldest residential street. Nevertheless, the interiors of these homes have changed with history. For example, interpreters are quick to point out that only one trinity house remains intact on the street.³⁵ The rest have been modified to allow for more rooms, some as many as eleven. As visitors attend Elfreth’s Alley open houses, they swoon over its age, admire its woodwork, revel in its quaintness, and wish that they lived in these homes where colonial Americans once had the opportunity to take part in this ideal community. Needless to say, the majority of visitors remain unaware of the true historical setting that encompassed these working class residents.

This issue presents Elfreth’s Alley with a complex paradox in museum studies and commemoration. Commemorative events are inherently limited to a certain period of time. Therein lays Elfreth’s Alley’s dilemma. “Fete Days” and “Deck the Alley” strive to commemorate past culture within a context of current residence. The Association seems torn between entertainment and accuracy. Special events do not truly tell the history of Elfreth’s Alley, but are nevertheless a worthwhile, fun, and profitable event that is necessary to the Alley’s educational and preservation missions. The Alley must do its best to reconcile historical differences with the inaccuracies that are now presented. If a proper narrative does not accompany guests in their visit, they should be told that such events do not represent the history of the Alley, but are for their pleasure. Exploiting Philadelphia’s curiosity in these homes’ interior is justified, to exploit history is not. But history can play a larger role than it currently does to increase the event’s accurate historical interpretation.

Elfreth’s Alley as Commemorative Museum

While the commemoration of Elfreth’s Alley’s legacy, not history, is the focus of “Fete Days,” teaching the history of Elfreth’s Alley and its residents is the responsibility of the Elfreth’s Alley Museum. Unlike commemorations, museums are not bound in scope by physical or ideological limits. Rather, museums thrive to

³⁴ Urban archives, “Renewal Plan Resisted,” 9 June 1974; Executive Director Beth Richards of Elfreth’s Alley, interview by author, 18 November 2004. “Deck the Alley” is one of two annual open house events held in December to showcase the Alley’s Christmas charm and decorations.

³⁵ A trinity house is comprised of three stories with one room to a floor and a kitchen in the basement. Trinity houses used to be very common in Philadelphia in the eighteenth century, but have fallen out of style with modern residents.

present such contrasts. The Elfreth's Alley Museum, while limited in its scope, is not physically constrained to retain this narrow focus. According to Falk and Dierking, a museum's task is to provide accurate information where citizens can "discover the past, present, and future."³⁶

Many visitors who attend annual events at Elfreth's Alley may see it come alive twice a year. What they overlook in the excitement of "Fete Days" is a living entity year round. This is the true uniqueness of the Alley. Regardless of how its residents portray the past, they are an important part of this Alley's continuing history. Elfreth's Alley is a unique living heritage museum unlike any other in the nation; these historic homes do not hire actors to play residents. This small Alley is a working museum that is dedicated to educating the public about colonial life and culture.

Oddly enough, educational opportunities remain scarce throughout the Alley. Visitors can sense the character of eighteenth century life simply by walking through this cultural phenomenon, but deeper interpretation and information about the Alley's history elude ninety percent of its tourists, according to Alley statistics. The Association headquarters and adjacent museum house at #124/126 are the only locations for historic information along the Alley.³⁷ For three dollars, a fifteen to thirty minute tour attempts to provide historical context to the Alley. Yet in a half hour, the tour should cover over three hundred years of history. Needless to say, the narrative tends to focus on the history of the house and its colonial occupants with a very brief prologue about its early preservation efforts.

The museum house is a tremendous success in education. It is appropriately furnished with period furniture according to an estate inventory of 1766.³⁸ Visitors who have attended either of the Alley's open houses would be stupefied by this plain dwelling. The Alley's elegantly quaint and colorful exterior does not prepare the visitor for what life was like for residents in the eighteenth century. The museum house successfully astonishes guests with a small, simple, and historically accurate presentation of a colonial interior that dramatically contrasts the modern and spacious abodes that some residents now occupy. Considering the Alley's history, this museum does an excellent job giving the public a sense of Philadelphia's not so romanticized colonial days.

Yet the tour narrative lacks contextual substance concerning the social history of the Alley's three hundred years. The Association relies on the house to provide the most stimulating information about the Alley's residents. Unlike preservation, this cannot present three hundred years of history. Thus, the Museum's responsibility is to tell a story that its Alley's façade cannot. The tour's

³⁶ Falk, 2.

³⁷ These properties have been under the ownership of the Association and served as its headquarters since 1962.

³⁸ Urban Archives, "The Philadelphia," 7 June 1961.

narrative pays little attention to those who lived on the Alley after 1800 or the early history of Philadelphia.

While Elfreth's Alley has not changed with the advent of technology, its residents have. Generations of families have lived on this street not only during the Revolutionary War, but every subsequent war to this day. The Association has recognized in recent years that this is not only a museum of colonial character and memory, but an ongoing history of everyday American residents. The past five years have been essential in understanding and bringing about this change.

In 1999, Beth Richards was hired to become Elfreth's Alley's third executive director. At the time, the tour's script had not been changed since it was first given in 1962.³⁹ Richards understood the need to document and convey the Alley's diversity. Historians were hired to research its history from 1810-1930 as well as to meet with current residents individually to document their stories and homes. Recently, the Alley also received an interpretation grant to continue this work.⁴⁰ These noble efforts indicate that Elfreth's Alley is dedicated to telling the Alley's entire story, not only its famed colonial legacy as it has in the past. Yet significant changes have been slow in coming to an audience that deserves and would appreciate a full and accurate history of Elfreth's Alley.

A lack of interpretation outside the Museum has also been a concern for the Association. Of an estimated 250,000 visitors who travel to Elfreth's Alley each year, only 25,000 proceed to take the tour and receive any sort of official information about the Alley.⁴¹ When Richards was hired, she realized this was a major issue, but recognized that increased attendance was not a solution. Rather than try to bring more numbers into this cramped street, she decided to focus on better connecting and interacting with the current attendees. While crowd control has been discussed as a viable option in solving the interpretive problem identified in the past couple of years, the Association believes that Elfreth's Alley needs to remain a public space, even if an accurate image of the Alley's historical character continues to be misinterpreted by its visitors. In Richards' opinion, the Alley's interpretive problem can be solved with more interactive and public methods.⁴²

Overall, Elfreth's Alley as a museum has been the least successful of its programs and the Association recognizes that change is needed. Yet the Association has not accepted its ability to take advantage of its position as the oldest residential street in Philadelphia to build a museum that would tell both the

³⁹ Elfreth's Alley is believed to be the most researched street in the city thanks to the efforts of the Philadelphia Historical Commission and Hannah Brenner Roach, researcher for the Association. Nonetheless, this research is not presented to visitors as they walk the Alley or tour the Museum House. (Webster, 52.)

⁴⁰ Urban Archives, "A Fragment of the Past Athwart Expressway," 20 January 1957; Richards, 2004.

⁴¹ This number includes 10,000 school children who visit the Alley each year and take an individualized tour to their current lesson plans. (Richards, 2004.)

⁴² Richards, 2004.

city's early colonial and three hundred year working class history. "Fete Days" have established and exploited Elfreth's Alley as the trustee of this history in Philadelphia. As the Association has created such a tradition, the Museum's responsibility should be to interpret the historical context of these practices. This includes nothing less than explaining the broad history of colonial culture, Philadelphia's early history, and working class life in a museum setting.

Beth Richards' tenure as executive director has been integral in bringing change to Elfreth's Alley as an institution. Because of the work she has done to solve the managerial and curatorial issues that have plagued the Association for decades, the Alley Museum is now poised for success.⁴³ While it is poised and some beneficial planning has been done to take the right steps, the Alley is not committed to educating the public on such a broad scope as has been recommended above. The Alley's uniqueness as a residential street also interferes with its mission to educate the public. If the Association continues to prioritize the manipulation of Elfreth's Alley's history for entertainment purposes, residents should yield to a superior public right to access the Alley's true historical heritage. Perhaps a public organization, whether city, state, or federal, could restore each house to its original condition, further enhancing the colonial character of the Alley while remaining true to the accurate history of the street. The Elfreth's Alley Museum must take steps to fulfill its public responsibility to the public or lose its entitlement to do so.

Conclusion: An Alley In Transition

Elfreth's Alley has overcome numerous obstacles in order to become a prominent institution in preservation and education. In modern Philadelphia, no single seventeenth century homes still exist, but thirty-three authentic eighteenth century homes remain largely unimpaired, unexploited by commerce, and unimaginably quaint after three hundred years of residency.⁴⁴ No other city can exhibit such a display of our nation's heritage and therefore, Philadelphia has an invaluable responsibility to preserve and exhibit these wonders. Yet this mission must be done in a way that presents an accurate view of Elfreth's Alley from the colonial era through the present.

Just as essential to this site has been its ability to overcome diversity, mismanagement, destruction, construction, tourism, and everyday ware. Elfreth's Alley has grown from an obscure back alley neighborhood into a thriving residential community that happens to attract thousands of guests per year. It has worked tirelessly to overcome obstacles and become a successful institution

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Moss, 24.

through the preservation efforts of residents and neighbors to whom the nation owes much gratitude.

The Association's efforts, however, do not stop with preservation. As trustees of this historic alley, its residents recognized their responsibility to exhibit the Alley as a living museum. This museum would not be a recreated or gathered accompaniment of historic homes as Williamsburg, Deerborn, or Sturbridge. Through special events like 'Elfreth's Alley Day' and "Deck the Alley" in conjunction with the year round interpretation and tours in the Museum House, Elfreth's Alley in an essential stop for Americans seeking a glimpse of their early heritage and culture. But an authentic historical experience remains illusive.

In this regard, the Elfreth's Alley Association's future will only become brighter as a new director and innovative ideas continue to flow forth from its headquarters. As the Alley continues this current transition in personnel, the nation can be comforted that Elfreth's Alley has already dedicated itself to a future that will strive to preserve and present the character of this continuing American commemoration. In return, citizens must demand that Elfreth's Alley tell the full story of its three hundred year past without romanticizing working class society. In the mean time, I highly recommend that all Americans stroll along Elfreth's Alley. But keep in mind its diverse and impressive history when you do and you too will come away with a better appreciation of this country's heritage. So God save Elfreth's Alley.