

H72.3049 The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries
Professor Howard Besser
03/28/17
Caroline Z. Oliveira

Observational Study: The Merchant's House Museum and the Ottendorfer Library

In order to complete my observational study, I decided to visit the following cultural institutions: the Merchant's House Museum and the Ottendorfer Library. Both located in the east village (the museum is at East Fourth Street and the library on Second Avenue), these two buildings were first erected during the 19th century, the museum being the home of the Tredwell family and the library being the first public library in New York City. I concluded it would be interesting to compare and contrast them, based on the fact they are geographically close and from the same period of time, but attract very different people.

On Saturday February 25, 2017, at approximately 1:10 in the afternoon, I visited the Merchant's House Museum. After pressing the buzzer and entering the building, I was directed to an open room in the back of the house where I was able to purchase my ticket and was then given a black binder. The binder was divided into four parts; each part was designated to a floor in the building and contained information on the objects displayed, accessible rooms, floor plans, and facts about

the everyday life of the Tredwell family. It was permissible for guests to enter each

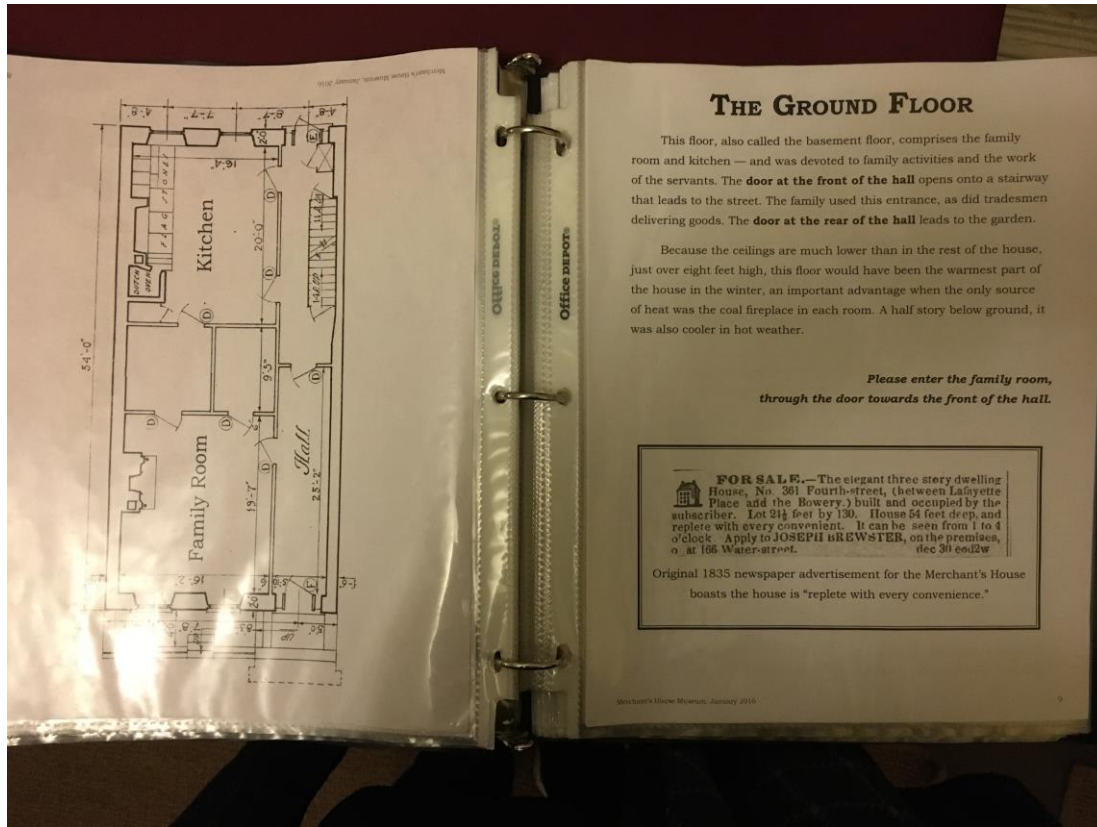


Figure 1 - Binder from the Merchant's House Museum

room detailed in the binder, but velvet ropes kept them from interacting with the Victorian objects and going deeper into the rooms. There were also signs requesting the guests not to touch certain displays and objects, but no signs regulating photo taking and cell phone use. There were also no guards supervising the visitors at any point.

At the time of my visit, there were about ten other guests circulating the museum. All visitors were Caucasian, mostly in their 40s and up. There was one visitor who was in her twenties and the majority of visitors (seven out of the ten) were women. Judging by how nicely dressed everybody was, I would place the visitors in the upper middle to upper class. Most seemed to be familiar with the

history of the property and engaged in deep conversations with their partners. For the most part, I was able to observe the visitors by following them around and eavesdropping on their conversations.

The majority of the visitors walked in pairs and discussed what they saw and read. To figure out the exact time people spent in the different rooms and reading the provided information, I used a stopwatch application on my phone. On the underground level, a couple of ladies discussed what they were reading on a board, which displayed the Tredwell's family tree. They spent about eight minutes and 46 seconds on the board.

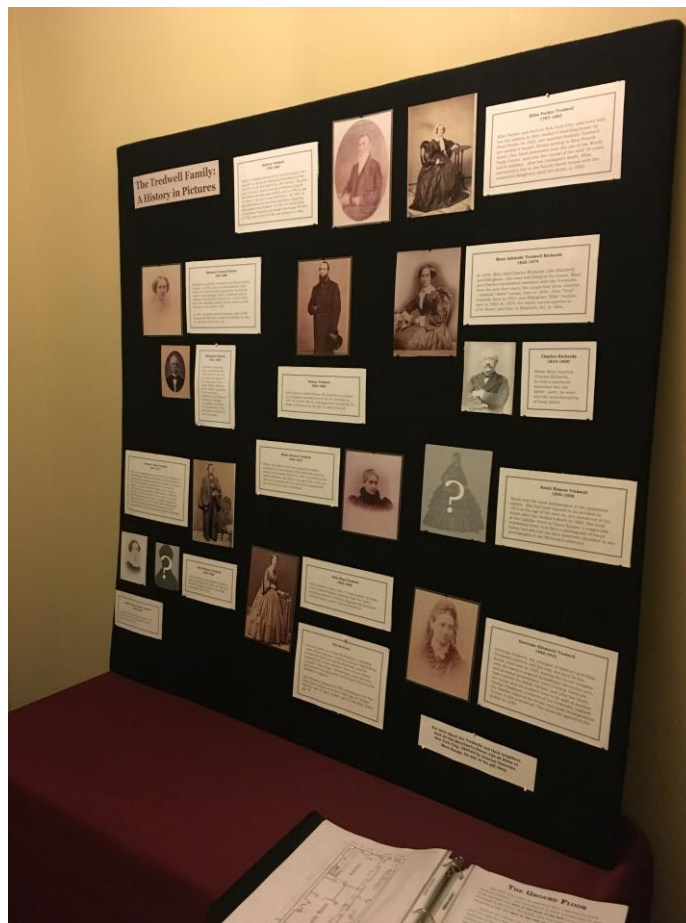


Figure 2 - Tredwell Family Tree

In general, guests would enter a room, spend five to seven minutes reading the information on the binder and then explore the setting and the objects. In larger rooms such as the Greek-Revival Parlors (which faces the street), guests spent a total of ten minutes and 17 seconds, while in smaller rooms, such as the servants', about three minutes and 19 seconds.



Figure 3 - Greek Revival Parlor

There were only a few chairs available at the museum, some in the Greek-Revival Parlors and the others on the last floor, just outside the servant's room. I

noticed when these chairs were available, people sat down and read from the binder before walking around the room. Consequently, this would make them stay longer at the place.

Strategically placed near the entrance door to the museum and by the gift shop, there were three different flyers with information on the building, a list of books related to the 19th century, ghosts who are said to haunt the building, and a donation form. The donation forms were also available on the lower level, next to a board, which contained information and pictures on a new hotel that will endanger the Merchant's House during its construction. It was in front of this board the visitors engaged with others, expressing their distaste for the construction.

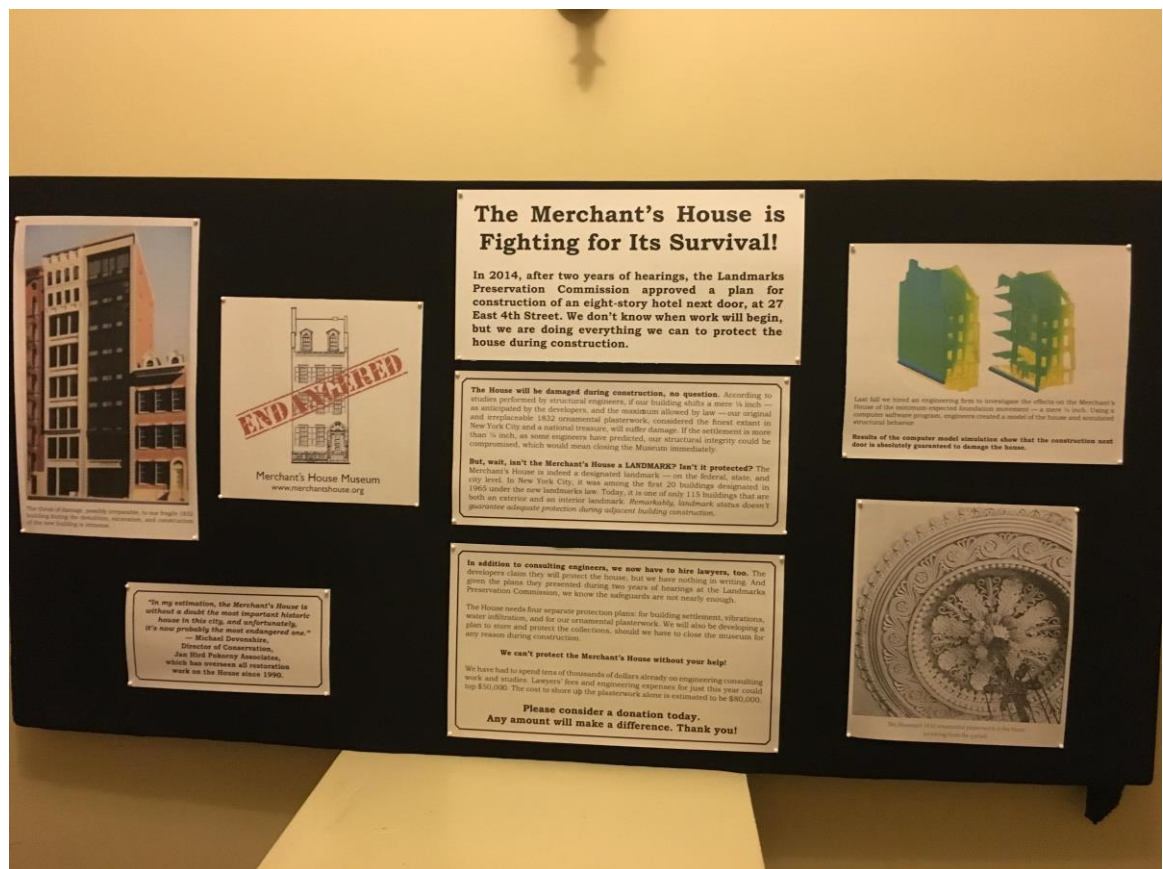


Figure 4 - Another Information Board

Although the museum is well known for its ghost tours and special Halloween events, during my visit, I noticed visitors were not particularly interested on that side of its history (they for instance did not take any flyers about ghosts). I believe had I visited the place later in the day, the crowd would be more interested on that side of the museum, especially if I had attended one of the monthly ghost tours.

To continue my observational study, I visited the Ottendorfer Library on the Monday of February 27, 2017, at 12:19. Upon entering, I noticed several flyers right next to the entrance. Some of the flyers were about the library, detailing its hours, rules, and events, others were about other cultural places like the Bronx Museum, and finally others were about community events and services (such as a center for the elderly). Nearby, there was also a message board filled with flyers of similar nature. I also noticed one sign in the main reading room asking visitors to refrain from using cell phones.



Figure 5 - Flyers and Pamphlets

There were about 26 people using the reading room. I noticed the group of people using the facilities was more diverse than the visitors at the Merchant's House Museum. There were people of different races (Caucasian, African American, Latino, Hispanic, Chinese, and Korean) and genders reading books and on their personal computers. The ages ranged from 20s to 60s and judging by how people were dressed, they belonged to different social-economical groups. I also noted the majority was visiting the library singly. I asked a library worker if the number of people at the library during the time of my visit was common and she confirmed that in most days they welcome a similar amount of people at that hour.



Figure 6 - Reading Room

Using a stopwatch, I was able to determine people browsed for books from five to ten minutes before finding one they liked. While most people already had a particular book in mind (about 80% asked the librarian directly for the book or DVD), some still browsed for nothing special, just checking out the new releases and reading synopsis. I decided this time around to engage with the visitors directly and asked them how long they normally spend at the library to get a better sense of how

they used the space. The range turned out to be from one hour to two and half hours, based on what five people told me.

On the basement level, there is a computer room, where all users were male in their upper 60s, Caucasian and African American. They stayed in the room for over one hour. I believe that had I visited at a different time, the age group in this room would still be similar since it is common for younger generations to be more likely to own a personal computer, but maybe there would be individuals of different races and genders present. There is also a chance that younger people were not present at the time of my visit due to school or work.

On the second floor, there is a children's room where young females (in their 30s) played with very young children (around one year old). There were three ladies and their babies there. I did not have a chance to time their stay but based on what a library worker told me, they normally stay there for one hour.

After visiting the Merchant's House Museum and the Ottendorfer Library, I was able to spot several differences between these two cultural institutions. While the Merchant's House Museum seemed to attract Caucasian upper middle class couples in their 40s, the Ottendorfer Library was a culturally and socio-economic diverse space with people of different ages. As one could easily imagine, visitors at the library touched books and DVDs, spent most of their time sitting down, and refrained from talking. At the museum, visitors talked amongst themselves, spent most of their time walking around, and did not touch any objects that were part of the exhibition. Studying these two cultural institutions allowed me to note differences that I had not paid attention to before.