

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of  
Carolyn Grimstead

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Carolyn Grimstead conducted by Interviewer Rachel Schimke on March 20, 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Carolyn Grimstead began volunteering with the Morris-Jumel Mansion in the 1970s, eventually becoming president of the Mansion. While she was there, the Historic House Trust was formed, and the management of the Mansion changed hands, from the Daughters of the American Revolution to the Morris-Jumel Inc. nonprofit. The changeover allowed the Mansion to access more funding, which in turn let them bring in curatorial support to design the rooms to reflect different time periods as well expanding their programming. She later was a board member of the Historic House Trust [HHT] and shares how the Trust has helped the historic houses in New York City. She speaks about how local communities were extremely important in maintaining some historic houses, and how the HHT provides support to small house museums, including Poe Cottage, Lefferts Historic House and the Morris-Jumel Mansion.

Carolyn Grimstead is the former president of the board of the Morris-Jumel Mansion. She first became involved with the historic house through volunteering in the 1970s, and eventually joining the board of trustees and becoming board president. She later joined the board of the Historic House Trust after its formation in the late 1980s.

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Interviewee: Carolyn Grimstead

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Q: Could we start off by talking about your background and how you first got involved with the Historic House Trust as a whole, and then with the Morris-Jumel Mansion in particular?

Grimstead: Sure. It was actually the reverse. I first became involved with Morris-Jumel because in the 1970s a friend of mine bought a house on Sylvan Terrace. Of course I had never heard of Sylvan Terrace before and I didn't know this area at all. I was helping her move in and I came up to this area and I was just astonished that this even existed in Manhattan, and especially something from this time period, the 1700s. Subsequent to that I decided to just come over and volunteer, and that's how I became introduced to the mansion. I just started volunteering on the weekends—and this was before the mansion was restored or landscaped or anything—for most of the 1970s.

Q: So what did volunteering entail then at that point?

Grimstead: At that point it was wonderful because my kids were little and I would bring them with me. We would sit on the portico out front and they would run wild around the park *[laughter]* and I sat in a rocking chair and waited for visitors. Maybe one or two people would come, tops, and I let them in and let them wander around and then they left.

Then I went back and let my kids run around. We ate lunch, and then it was time to go home at four o'clock, so I locked up. There was a caretaker here then, and she would patrol the grounds, but if anybody came inside I would take care of that part. When it was time to go, we would lock up—close and lock all the doors and windows together, and then put the chain on the gate—so it was very informal. It was free too. We didn't have a charge.

Q: So then how did you become involved with the Historic House Trust?

Grimstead: The Historic House Trust was much later—it hadn't even formed yet. It formed in the late 1980s, in 1989. From my volunteering I was asked to join the board of trustees. Once I joined the board of trustees here, then I became president. It was when I was president, in the late 1980s, that the Historic House Trust formed. Up to that point it was a hostile relationship between the historic houses and the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation]—not that it was adversarial, but those of us who were at historic houses were all volunteers, and trying to draw something from the Parks Department was always a struggle. Trying to get involved with the budgets and municipal government—there was no venue for that. It was just individuals going to these committee meetings with legislators to try to convince them that some house that they had never heard of really needed a budget line for maintenance, because the City of New York actually owned all the houses.

But these volunteer groups—and I think it's still true for all the houses—the volunteer groups ran the museum. When the Historic House Trust was proposed, most of us were incredulous about, “Well, why are you bringing a third party into this already tense situation?” I remember thinking it would only siphon money, the small pot of money, from what the houses needed, and it would go over to this third bureaucratic layer. Of course that view of mine changed *[laughter]*.

Q: Speaking more about the early history of the house, I've read about how in the early Twentieth Century there was a dispute between the Daughters of the American Revolution [DAR] and the Colonial Dames [The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America] as to who should have control of the mansion. Can you talk about how the Parks Department finally decided to give control of the mansion to the DAR and what that process was like?

Grimstead: Are you familiar with the City Beautiful movement?

Q: A bit, yes.

Grimstead: That was earlier, like 1904. When that was ongoing, that's when the DAR got involved. I don't know whether they volunteered, or whether someone in city government asked the chapter—because there used to be a chapter up here, in northern Manhattan. As the city began to change, especially after World War II, out of that chapter there were maybe three women who were still alive. So from that DAR chapter, between the 1950s

and the 1960s, when the neighborhood really radically changed, maybe there were three or four DAR members left. Many on the board then felt that they had to bring in other people from other walks of life.

There was a family that lived across the street, Miriam and Hamilton Lee [*phonetic*]. Hamilton, her husband, was a member of the original Landmarks Commission [New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission]. He's the one who secured the designation for this historic district—this historic district is one of the first historic districts in the city. By the time I came along, which was the late 1970s, Hamilton had passed away, but Miriam was a board member.

When I was asked to join the board, the board then, in the 1980s, was primarily older women of European descent—the ladies who lunch crowd. To my astonishment, they asked me to join. The whole arena of government financing and public policy—they didn't have a clue about that. That's what they expected me to bring to the table, because at that time I was working in city government. Once I got on the board, I brought in other people with other areas of expertise, and I think we got down to maybe two women with DAR connections, and they left of their own accord. It wasn't acrimonious. I think they were getting older anyway, and you really had to work on this board. This wasn't a board where you had tea and sandwiches and you go home. The mansion was falling apart, so we really had to do quite a bit of work.

Q: I'm curious, was it the DAR who pushed for the mansion to be opened as Washington's Headquarters? I saw on your website that that's what it was initially called and sort of promoted as.

Grimstead: Yes, and it was run as a private club. Are you from New York?

Q: I just moved here a few months ago.

Grimstead: There is a local legislator—I think he still lives on 162nd Street—who grew up in this area, and he remembers—now he's got to be in his seventies—coming here as a child with his babysitter and looking through the iron fence and watching these private parties, and seeing people actually riding horses around and dressing up in colonial costumes. So this was an image we had to work to get rid of. Now we just say, yes, it was Washington's headquarters, but it was run as a private club for decades, until the early 1960s.

Q: Can you speak a bit about how the mansion became incorporated into the Historic House Trust?

Grimstead: It was automatic. It was owned by the city, so all the houses that were actually owned by the city just automatically became part of the Historic House Trust. It's only been in recent years that the Trust has acquired property or historic houses have asked to be let in.

Q: Speaking as a Historic House Trust board member, can you talk about the challenges that the care and use of Morris-Jumel presents as compared to some of the other houses?

Grimstead: Sure. A lot of the enthusiasm for Morris-Jumel comes from its board members, but it's also based on the fact that it's a beautiful property. It's not a hard sell to try to preserve this, so you're working with many positives to begin with. Many of the other houses are just lacking in amenities. Bowne House comes to mind. Have you been there?

Q: Not to that one yet, no.

Grimstead: Let me not pick on Bowne House. Poe Cottage—a shack, which is in a city park. What makes it relevant is just the association with Edgar Allen Poe. You can't just say, "Oh, it's so beautiful." The attraction in bringing visitors to Poe's Cottage has to be in the programming. You've got to really develop some strong, compelling programming to draw people up there, other than school groups who have to read Poe or something like that. But just to go up there? It doesn't have its own cache.

Q: So would you say then that Morris-Jumel is an easier sell as compared to some of the other houses?

Grimstead: I don't know if it's an easier sell. Are you thinking of marketing, fundraising?



Q: Yes, I guess I'm thinking of sort of the whole package, marketing, fundraising, programming.

Grimstead: Well, what I think is the most obvious thing—it was easier for me to just tell people to come meet me at the mansion. You can get here, you can find it. Maybe you've never been to this area before, but you can find it. I tell somebody, meet me at the George Washington Lighthouse [*laughter*]. What are you talking about? Where is it? How do I get there? There has to be an event there to draw anybody. So in that sense it's easier. Here's a place, we leave it—it's still going to be here. It's something that you could talk about fifty years ago, you could talk about it fifty years in the future, and it's still going to be here. So it's the true sense of a landmark.

Poe's "Shack" is really related to the person and the programming. The shack has been restored and everything and it has some relevance as a structure, but the average New Yorker, to go to Poe's Cottage, there would have to be programming or contests or something. That would be the only way to market it. Neighborhood wise, it's not that kind of location. So yes, I think if your site, whatever it is, if you have an actual structure that is compelling in itself, it's a lot easier. As a preservation project and for fundraising and for marketing, because you can point to it and say, "It's over there." When it's something vague and amorphous and it's just associated with a person, that's a much harder sell, because it's abstract.

Q: Can you talk a bit about some of the recent renovations that the mansion has undergone?

Grimstead: Well the most recent ones, since I'm not on the board anymore here, I can't really rattle off. Ken [Moss] can. But the whole entrance out front, that was just finished to make it accessible to the disabled or people who are somehow mobility impaired. It used to be—were you here last year? Is this your first time?

Q: I've been to the house before, this is my second time, but that was pretty recently so it was finished when I was here.

Grimstead: You used to have to come through the gate—the gates had to be open, of course—and there was one step, and then you walked maybe five feet and there were four more stone steps, and then you came to the door or took the path. Now this is much more open and inviting and well made. But before, the access was limited. Now, this is much more inviting and much more embracing of the district. This is something that was talked about when I was president, and becoming ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] compliant. So you see it's twenty years later and it's getting done *[laughter]*.

Structurally that's what we were involved in when I was on the board here. That took a lot of persuasion of, not only the Parks Department, but of state and county officials to really make it a priority. Historic houses are nowhere on the legislative layout. That was a whole lobbying effort, because there was no Historic House Trust, and the state

organizations and the Preservation League [of New York State]—I would say that their issues were much broader in scale, like trying to get tax credits for people who bought homes and wanted to get credits for restoring and things like that. Old houses just weren't on anybody's radar unless you were in Charleston or Richmond. But New York? Even talking to a New Yorker, they'd say, "An old house? Tear it down, build something new." That's the New York way.

Trying to push that agenda, because it needed structural work, it needed a new roof, and down in the basement with the foundation, there were certain areas that were crumbling. It was a lot of work. And we're talking about volunteers who really put in hours and hours—not just me, but everybody who was on the board at that time. Plus at that time we only had one staff person, because that was all we could afford. We were raising all the money, doing all the work, and we hired one person, and then we finally got to the point where we were able to hire on staff [*unclear*]. Those were the renovations that we're most proud of, the really structural [*unclear*], the ones where you can really look at the house and say, "Oh, wow, it really looks the way it used to."

Q: I saw that now the operation of the mansion has transferred from the DAR to the Morris-Jumel Mansion, Inc. What was that process like?

Grimstead: That was under my tenure. We didn't have any more DAR members, and it was an independent body. We decided that we had to formally incorporate, just to raise money. This was when we were really moving into formal development—writing

proposals, formal development work, formal fundraising events. That's why we decided to create this nonprofit, and the nonprofit is in charge of running the museum. That was late 1980s. I remember we came to a decision that that was something we had to do formally, because you can't raise money without a 501(c)3.

Then we were really writing grants and trying to get money from NEA [National Endowment for the Arts]. I remember going to NEA on several visits, because I was going to Washington [D.C] a lot anyway, so I would just drop in and say, "Hi, we applied, what's going on?" That helped a lot. Once we got that NEA grant, that really opened the way to a lot of other grants. And once we were able to do that, we got our staff and make programming, and the board members could do less hands-on activity. That was the way it's supposed to work, so that's what happened—ideally *[laughter]*. Looking back on it, it was a very smooth transition. I know of many other organizations where it's much more dramatic. The old ladies, they just died out, so there was never a power struggle or anything like that. This was something that everybody knew we had to do.

Q: In the class I'm taking we've talked a lot about the interpretation of historic sites. I'm curious how it was decided to have each room reflect a different time period rather than focus all on one period.

Grimstead: As the board became more professional, we brought in professional curators who had worked at museums. What the DAR had had done was like decorating your

house—this is going to be this room, this is going to be this room. But it was all different styles, there was no thematic thread running through it. Then the board decided, on the recommendation of the museum professionals that we should do commissioned studies of actual history in terms of the neighborhood and the different periods of the house, and then to decide what we really wanted to focus on. Again, this was a long process, like fifteen years of work.

It has consistently been Madame [Eliza] Jumel's bedroom—even the DAR had that as Madame Jumel's bedroom. The parlor has remained the parlor. The dining room, which is more consistent with George Washington's period—that has become more in line with historical relevance. The same with this room, it more reflects the colonial period. I would say it's still a process. Where the kitchen is downstairs—that's done through a number of phases of trying to figure out what to do with that, because it's small and it's dark and you can't really have a fire because of fire codes. How do you interpret it to make it relevant to anything that's upstairs? So whereas Madame Jumel's bedroom and the parlor are much more reflective of the tastes of women at that time, the other rooms are not as heavily focused on style. They're more relevant to historical fact.

Q: It seems like it's usually the local community that's the first to rally to save a historic site. Were there any efforts by any local groups, other than the DAR, to preserve the house at any point in its history? And what is the local community's relationship to the house today?

Grimstead: Well, the people living across the street—there was a Jumel Terrace Block Association because of those houses across the street. Their efforts to create the historic district, that was entirely their effort—that had nothing to do with the DAR. It was entirely a community effort. The same with Sylvan Terrace, which has a block association. West 160th has a block association. West 162nd has a block association. The very tall apartment building on the corner, 555 Edgecombe [Avenue], has a tenant's association. All of these were very active. Once the historic district was established, and attendance just declined in terms of the DAR, they really became active in preserving the house. That's the only reason it stayed white. This is a prime target, if you really think about it, for graffiti or just plain old vandalism, because there was nobody here at night. Teenage boys—what better thing to do than become destructive? But that never happened, ever. If you think of all the years the house has been here, and it's white *[laughter]*. Way before there was an alarm system and we had infrared cameras, this house was shabby, but it remained intact. That's all due to the neighbors, to the block associations. The Parks Department never came here. It's all due to the neighbors. They played a big role.

Q: Would you say that continues today, that the local community is still really active? I saw in your programming that you have art exhibits that you do annually with the community.

Grimstead: Oh yes, it's very active. There's a jazz festival in the summer that's all local talent and it's a local effort to have that. Kids have birthday parties when the weather's

nice, and weddings— all of that is local. Even when I started, there was always a sense that the house belongs to these block associations. I think that's mainly because the DAR just faded away, and once they had faded the neighborhood was ready to step in. There was no hesitation about that.

Q: Is that pretty common for most of the other historic houses? Do they have the same level of community support or does that vary depending on some of the things we talked about earlier?

Grimstead: Yes, it varies depending on the location. I know Wyckoff House has that level of community support—block associations, civic associations, churches, because it's right in the middle of a neighborhood. The neighborhood has sort of grown up around it. I know that Lefferts [Historic] House has always suffered from the lack of that, because it's in Prospect Park, plus you can't see it unless you're looking for it. There's no reason to know that Lefferts House is there, and Lefferts House has really suffered from that. I'm sure that's one of the reasons they stopped the programming. That's unfortunate, because that could really be a compelling site. Places like Poe's Cottage and the [Little Red] Lighthouse, same thing—there are no people. Some of the others, like Bowne House, there's just no contact with people, so they suffer as a result.

Q: Is there anything else about the mansion, particularly about its preservation history, that you think would be important for us to know?

Grimstead: Well I think if you start with the City Beautiful movement, because that was really a point where the house was passing out of private ownership. The City of New York was able to acquire it, so that was very important. I don't know what would have happened to it if they'd just sold it to some Mr. X, they might have just torn it down. To give the DAR credit, for them to come in and preserve it as they saw fit—okay, fine. Then the community really changed and these houses were built—the brownstones—it was also important, another big step for them to throw their support into keeping the house. Those were big important steps. Now of course, the Historic House Trust is active and prominent and institutionalized, and that's what you want—institutional support to really bring all the houses to a certain level of activity and support.

Q: What do you see for the mansion's future?

Grimstead: Everything, when I come up which is rare, looks great to me, and I see lots of activity and exhibits. When I was here we didn't have time for exhibits—we were too busy trying to keep the building standing! So exhibits, that's great. I'd like to see exhibits in all the historic houses, and changing them, because that draws in an entirely different crowd. I'd like to see, for all the houses, some kind of online interactive presence—either you can go online and visit the rooms or you can go online and plays games or do something, because that's all part of Twenty-first Century stuff. You really want to keep the interest active. That's where I'd like to see all the houses go. Some are much further along than others, but that's all part of the process. The Queens County Farmhouse, which is actually a working farm—great! And now they're getting into this whole



sustainability movement and growing foods and selling them to restaurants—that's perfect, because that's in keeping with what's ongoing in our culture right now. Ken did have a garden, so maybe a farmer's market is a little further down the road with the local community. That would be another way to draw in a whole different crowd. That's what you want to do, keep it relevant to the current population.

Q: This question just kind of popped into my head: when you were volunteering here, the people who would just stop by, were they local residents who were just curious, or what was their motivation for stopping by?

Grimstead: How did they get here? The Japanese always came on the subway. How they got here, I have no idea. Two or three would come together, or one by themselves, no English—they just knew that this was where George Washington watched the burning of New York. That's it. They were happy just to walk around the grounds and then got back on the subway. In the 1970s a Japanese television crew came here and did a whole TV show about the mansion, which they only showed in Japan—which is just fascinating in itself.

Q: It'd be interesting to track down!

Grimstead: Yeah, to try and find it! We probably didn't get a copy because we just weren't organized and there was no staff at that point anyway, so no one to keep track of it.

And on Sunday mornings, there was a local company of gospel tours. I never met the man who started it, but he developed tours for foreign visitors to come. He would bring them here first just to walk around—they'd come on buses—and then they'd go visit a church and listen to gospel music. I think he started this in the late 1950s, early 1960s. Now it's a big business, and it's the same thing—they come here, they walk around, they get back on the bus, they go somewhere and listen to gospel music at a church. When I was volunteering, those were the two main groups, the Japanese and the gospel tours. Then there was the odd person who had heard about it, the odd American. But hardly any tourists other than the ones that came with that gospel tour.

Q: Who would you say is the main group of people who come today? Is it mainly tourists, is it mainly school groups—

Grimstead: I would say half are school groups. In the 1970s we didn't have school groups, because you have to have a staff person or two—one who just deals with the administrative part, because with the New York City Department of Education it's very complicated to get paid in terms of offering school tours. You have to fill out all these forms and then you have to do a different thing with the invoicing to get into their system and then later it became about computers and everything had to be computerized. So it was a job, somebody's job had to be to come in everyday and the first thing you do is check on Department of Education invoices. Then somebody else actually has to give the tour for the school groups, so administratively you had to have a staff to handle it. So that

was one of the big programming challenges, trying to get these school tours, because that's a big source of income.

Then plus, you're building in a future audience. Of course some of the kids could care less, but many kids really enjoy it and they become interested in history or preservation and they come back with their families. Once we got the school tours going, I would run into kids who would bring their families back, so that was a good thing—it's its own marketing tool. But in the early days, nobody came. And especially right around the neighborhood, nobody came. In fact I came up here in a cab and I told the driver, "This is a museum, you should come." Because he lives up here and he's never been here.

Q: Yeah, that seems to be a pretty common phenomenon, that when something's right there people never visit it.

Grimstead: Yeah, there could be days when I sat here and nobody came. It was just me and my kids, and I would read *The New York Times* and it was lovely [laughter].

Q: I'm sure, having it all to yourself.

Grimstead: Yes, but obviously that couldn't go on. I will say though that that's typical of all the historic houses. You really have to develop a professional staff and make it somebody's job to market. That's where the Historic House Trust has come in. As a professional administrative unit, they have the capacity to do marketing on a much larger

scale than if you individually tried to send out brochures to all the top tour vendors in Europe and New York City. That's something that the Historic House Trust can administrate on so many different levels that local historic house staff can't do. That kind of clout is important for the historic houses. As a board member with the Trust, I can see its made a tremendous difference in the capacity of the houses to grow and remain relevant, because there's this other body that raises money and does the marketing and can provide curatorial assistance help you write grants, etc. and act as a go-between between you and the Parks Department. So the Trust is really very important.

[END OF INTERVIEW]