

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Ken Moss

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Ken Moss conducted by Interviewer Megan Findling in 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of oral history interviews.

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Ken Moss worked in non-profits and historic buildings for years before coming to the Morris-Jumel Mansion. He speaks in this interview about the history of the Mansion, including the early beginnings of the house museum, which was managed by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The architectural and design details of the house have been altered over the years as the ownership changed, but many original details have been preserved. He also describes the educational partnership with local schools, and the challenges of increasing community involvement.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Ken Moss

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Megan Findling

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Q: How did you get involved with Morris-Jumel [Mansion] because I know you used to work at Dyckman Farmhouse?

Moss: That's right. A long time ago I used to work for the City Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation], actually in more of a horticulture field. At that time there was a hiring freeze on so when the position opened up for a position at Dyckman house as the director of Dyckman house, they needed to hire someone from within the Parks Department. And as it happened I had some experience working for a not-for-profit out on Long Island called Homestead Arts. I did mainly volunteer work for them but you know helping with programs and stuff like that and just helping out with projects on this farm, which was an actual farm. I had some experience with some other not-for-profits, and I was on the board of a not-for-profit, so you know, although Dyckman was a municipal museum it made me fairly well qualified for the house.

I also had some carpentry experience, not that they wanted me doing any carpentry, but they wanted me to understand carpentry and building. So that's how I started and once I was at Dyckman house I did some formal studies in arts administration and in history. By the time I

came to Morris-Jumel Mansion, about five years later, I had both an educational background and some experience operating a historic house.

Q: What are the main preservation or restoration challenges that are facing Morris-Jumel right now?

Moss: Well I mean we are very fortunate at Morris-Jumel that the house has had pretty good attention over the years so that right now, I want to knock on some wood as I say it, that we're not facing any major preservation issues. But every historic house has concerns. Water is always our biggest enemy. We got a new roof now maybe eight or six to eight years ago, and that gives us a little bit of security. From a historic house museum director's standpoint that's great news. Not that it's ever perfect—it's a cedar shake roof—but so far we have not seen water infiltration anywhere so that is great. Morris-Jumel Mansion also sits in basically a Manhattan schist bowl so water in the basement is always an issue. We do have water that moves through the basement during heavy rain and during snow melts and things like that. This is the sort of thing that would normally have an engineer completely freaked out, especially a new engineer. But you know some older structures go through their entire lives with some water movement and stuff in the basement and it's not necessarily a tremendous issue.

Q: So then do you not store any artifacts down there?

Moss: We don't store any of our significant artifacts in the basement. Well you know the rule of thumb is that you really don't want to store things in the basement or the attic and we really

don't store any artifacts in any wet parts of the basement and the few artifacts that are down there are actually elevated from the floor in closed cases that are capable of humidity control. We can put some desiccant trays in them if we need to adjust humidity levels inside the case but we right now just monitor the humidity levels to know that they're okay. And we don't have anything terribly significant going on down there.

Q: Wow it sounds like you are very lucky and well organized.

Moss: Well you know over time you try and get to everything but there's always something new.

Q: So then do most of finances come from grant writing or does the Historic House Trust help you out at all?

Moss: Historic House Trust doesn't do much in terms of direct support. Most of their help comes to us through in-kind support—you know their staff. They maintain a staff of highly educated people in historic preservation, in collections management, they often have a marketing person on staff who will give us advice, things like that. They generally give us a small contribution each year towards our operating but not a significant part of our budget. Most of our operating budget comes from both foundation support and individual contributions. That's really the great bulk of our support. We get, it's probably about fifteen percent of our support right now, fifteen to twenty percent is coming from earned income—from museum admissions, from gift shop sales, and from special use, which is weddings and things like that. So that gives us about twenty percent of our budget. The rest is all fundraising.

Q: I'm not sure if you are going to know the answer to these but there are things about the history of the house that I haven't been able to find much information on. Like I know that you used to be run by the Daughters of the American Revolution [DAR] and then now it's Morris-Jumel Inc. And I didn't know when that switched over or why that happened.

Moss: That's right. Sure. Morris-Jumel Mansion became a museum in 1904. The city acquired the house. It was actually in 1903 really that the acquisition took place. Then there was a year where establishing the kind of structure, the operating structure, took place. There was actually a little battle between a few different patriotic groups. In the end it was actually a coalition of four different chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and together they formed a not-for-profit corporation called the Washington's Headquarters Association [*phonetic*]. The Association's documents really drew a strong association with the Daughters of the American Revolution but the organization itself was not the Daughters of the American Revolution—it was an independent not-for-profit.

There were different membership levels that you could have to the organization but to be at the main voting level you really had to belong to one of those chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution. For all intents and purposes it was a typical DAR-type museum. The DAR was involved in the establishment of all sorts of historic sites or historic interpretations in other museums and things like that at that time. I think they may have been about the, they may have been responsible for the largest number of historic preservation projects during the really early Twentieth Century, the very late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century you know before say

1933. They established the house and then the city actually underwent a big project to restore the house to what they believed at that time was an accurate interpretation. We know now that there were some flaws in that project but for the most part they spent about two years working on the house and did a lot of stabilization. They installed central heating we think for the first time at that time, electricity I think was installed at that time.

These were things to make it functional as a museum so not everything was to restore it. They also though restored some of the rails and things like that that you see around the house. And still today if you look at the rail around the, what is really a faux widow's walk on the peak of the house, you'll see that it's a very geometric, linear railing design. If you look at the railing that's on the balcony there is a good deal of scroll-work and that's the railing that was installed during that restoration. We think they did that design on basically all the rails at that time. But later historians argued that that was inaccurate for the Morris period of the house at least and that that type of work should not have been installed if we were interpreting to the original Morris period of the house.

So the rails that you see in those rails, they don't have a tremendously long life, so it wouldn't surprise me to know that they have been replaced five or more times since then. So that kind of thing was going on. For many years it was thought that the balcony was not original, that it was added by the Jumels, but we know that it was original. The historic structures report basically established that it was original to the house. So the only major changes that the Jumels made, they purchased the house in 1810, we don't know exactly when they made the changes but they changed the door surrounds, the stained glass that you see around the front door. Basically the

front door and the balcony door, we know the Jumels updated, probably just trying to make the house a little more chic and bring it up to the period.

Q: Have you found anything else in subsequent renovations? I was looking at the National Register of Historic Places form that listed all these renovations which had gone on throughout the Twentieth Century.

Moss: Yes, I mean a historic site like this we are almost always engaged in some restoration of some component of the house. You know there haven't really been a lot of huge revelations; the structure remains very much as it was built. When we look at the site today we're looking mostly at the original historic fabric of the house. Some things that the Daughters early on found—the wallpaper that's exhibited in the second floor hall behind the glass, that was wallpaper that was found in the octagonal drawing room. So discoveries like that are pretty exciting. But otherwise, unfortunately that 1904-1905 restoration probably removed some evidence that we might otherwise be able to use to determine paint colors and things like that. We have still discovered what we think are very early paint samples tucked behind moldings and things like that over the years. But you know the project was pretty thorough in 1905 and they just didn't have the same concept that we would have today of conservation at a site like this so they wouldn't have thought we got to make sure we don't remove down to the last layer of paint.

Q: How has this house interacted with the community around it? Like I know I interned at one historic house where people would walk by every day and say what is that building. Is that how people are here or is the community pretty engaged with the house?



Moss: The community is very engaged with our house. We do a lot of community programming. We work with local schools—we actually partner with the nearest school, the Duke Ellington School [P.S. 4] and the kids come here regularly and our educator goes there regularly. We work with several other local organizations so we're always getting the word out. And we do a lot of programming that is targeted at the community as well. We do a lot of free programming to try and bring in our community. You know Washington Heights is a community with a large demographic that lacks resources so we try and make sure that we are accessible to that audience.

But that said it happens all the time that someone comes in and says you know I've lived in this community for twenty years and never came in here. We're just—we're off the avenue really. Even Edgecombe Avenue, which we do border, but we're way up elevated above it. We're sandwiched between two one-way streets that both run towards Edgecombe Avenue, they don't come from Edgecombe Avenue, which doesn't inhibit pedestrian traffic of course but people in cars who drive by on Edgecombe Avenue they would look up and think, oh that's interesting I wonder how you get there. Then of course we're a block removed from St. Nicholas Avenue, which is where the subway is, and there's tremendous pedestrian traffic so unless people venture up the little stairs at the end of Sylvan Terrace they don't necessarily see the house.

Q: Is Sylvan Terrace part of this historic district or affiliated with the museum in any way?

Moss: Sylvan Terrace is part of the historic district, as is Jumel Terrace, and a portion of 161st and 162nd Streets—they're all part of the district. They do have block associations—Sylvan Terrace has its own association, Jumel Terrace has its own association although technically Jumel Terrace is also, they all sort of form a single block association. 162nd Street, Jumel Terrace, and Sylvan Terrace—there is tremendous communication between all of the neighbors and so they meet periodically on community issues and we meet with them on issues. Usually we host their meetings.

Q: It sounds like you are doing a wonderful job getting everyone involved.

Moss: I don't know about that. We are trying to do a wonderful job.

[END OF INTERVIEW]