

*Rebirth of the House Museum: The Woodrow Wilson Family Home and Commemorating Reconstruction*

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*Rebirth of a House Museum* traces the transformation of the Woodrow Wilson Family Home (WWFH) in Columbia, South Carolina from an eighty year-old presidential shrine to the nation's first museum of Reconstruction. My project explores how a semi-guided house tour with limited objects and grounded in a specific time and place modernized an outdated house museum. The house itself became the primary artifact, supported by a panel exhibit and five original Wilson family objects. Like Reconstruction, this process was both revolutionary but less radical than its potential.

The dissertation serves as a public history manual for sites seeking to be more inclusive, tackling difficult or controversial interpretative transitions, and unraveling white supremacy. In addition to training and interpretative techniques, this guide presents docent oral histories as these voices are underrepresented in public history literature. The challenges of the WWFH's interpretation transformed the training process used by Historic Columbia, the organization that administers the home. Some docents rejected the new home and training because they held a negative memory of Reconstruction, were attached to the previous interpretation, or disliked the training process. The docents who excelled were women, those who worked in education, and those holding advanced degrees. Mandatory language and cultural sensitivity training was the first exposure for many white volunteer docents to concepts such as "white privilege" and coded language. Some docents ultimately used their tours to combat their own biases and Lost Cause indoctrination. Visitor evaluations reveal that the majority of guests touring the home knew little about Reconstruction but were eager to learn about the subject.

Southern house museums limit or exclude the narratives pertaining to non-elite whites and have great difficulty discussing white supremacy. The WWFH demonstrates how historiography, census records, architecture, image analysis, and docent training can illuminate the lives of unknown domestic workers. Docents were also successful in interpreting racialized and political terrorism and, for some, questioning their own privilege as white docents discussing violence. However, the museum did not prepare docents or use the exhibit to address the sexual terror and exploitation of women during Reconstruction. The site also struggled to deal with Wilson's white supremacy, even though it confronted Wilson's stance on segregation and his screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House, which other Wilson homes rarely addressed. Lynching, an epidemic during Wilson's presidency and a theme that connects the overthrow of Reconstruction to the film, was deemed too controversial and graphic for the tour. Docents were also reluctant to frame Wilson as a racist, but in the wake of student protests at Princeton challenging his memory, Historic Columbia generated new conversations with docents about his white supremacy.