

ABSTRACT

ACKMAN, NICOLE. "The Best House for 100 Miles": The History of the Joel Lane Museum House. (Under the direction of Dr. Craig Friend).

The Joel Lane Museum House is not only the oldest house in Raleigh but also one of the city's earliest historic house museums. This history of the house as a museum traces its development since first built in 1769 by Joel Lane, whose name it bears, best known for selling the land to the state of North Carolina upon which Raleigh was founded. The house then passed through several hands but spent much of the nineteenth century in possession of the Boylan family. In 1927, the Wake County Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America purchased the house with plans to preserve it. It functioned as a clubhouse and meeting space for several decades until the late-1960s when the Colonial Dames began restoring it in order to open it to the public. The museum officially opened in 1976 and was volunteer-run for several years before its eventual professionalization with the hiring of the first curator. Each subsequent curator and director have left their own personal mark on the museum, particularly as they have shifted interpretation away from Joel Lane to acknowledge the women and enslaved people who lived on the plantation. The Joel Lane Museum House provides a compelling microcosm of the larger history of the historic house museum movement from its amateur beginnings through professionalization and shifting interpretations.

“The Best House for 100 Miles”:
The History of the Joel Lane Museum House

by
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While at NC State, Nicole completed a summer internship at the Joel Lane Museum House, which served as the catalyst for this thesis. She also worked in the Khayrallah Center, creating a digital exhibit on Arab-American labor history. When she is not actively engaged as a historian, Nicole is a film critic and podcaster.

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INTRODUCTION

An unassuming burgundy house sits at the intersection of Saint Mary's Street and Hargett Street in Raleigh, North Carolina. Only the signage on the fence surrounding it, the presence of two additional buildings, and a small, enclosed herb garden hint that the building is something other than a personal residence. Most people who pass by are not aware that it is the oldest house in Raleigh, originally owned by the man who sold one thousand acres to the state of North Carolina on which to build a new capital city.

Built in 1769, the house was originally the home of politician and plantation owner Joel Lane (1739-1795). The two-story house has six rooms and two hallways, in addition to a separate kitchen and visitor's center. Since 1927, the Colonial Dames of America has operated the Joel Lane Museum House to preserve the history of Raleigh's oldest home and share its story with the city's residents and tourists. It has passed through several directors and transitioned from being entirely volunteer-run to employing a small professional staff. The site opened a visitor's center and gift shop, added a memorial to the plantation's enslaved laborers, and over the past four decades, has undergone significant changes in interpretation.

Although the house has existed since 1769, its history since its acquisition by the Colonial Dames is just as interesting as that of its earliest years. For some years, it functioned as a clubhouse, hosted Works Progress Administration programs, and finally underwent a significant restoration in the 1970s. Yet, little has been written about the history of the house, as a residence or as a museum. The Joel Lane Museum House functions as an excellent example of a Colonial Dame-owned property and as a general example of the trajectory of historic house museums from the 1970s to the present.

Historiography

Scholarship on house museums has been minimal. The first book about house museums was Laurence Vail Coleman's *Historic House Museums*, written in 1933. He chronicled the history of several existing house museums and created a guide to running a house museum. Notably, he argued for a more uniform system of museum ownership, specifically as governmental properties. Coleman's recommendations are not surprising. As the director of the American Association of Museums, housed in the Smithsonian Institution, he already understood the value of governmental support and investment, a perspective that would become stronger as a growing federal government tried to address the challenges of the Great Depression.¹

Charles Hosmer's *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (1965) was perhaps the most important early book about house museums and preservation, considered the "seminal work" on the topic for decades. Hosmer studied over four hundred historic buildings from the 1850s through the 1920s. He concluded that American preservation was essentially a movement dedicated to making the public care about American history. Furthermore, he stated that historians are indebted to the earliest public historians for "[preparing] the American people to accept the idea of spending money for the seemingly profitless activity of saving a few of the spots that contributed to the study of history."²

¹ Laurence Vail Coleman, *Historic House Museums* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1933); Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1999), 133.

² Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 298, 303; Carol Hagglund, review of *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, by Patricia West, *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (February 2001): 224.

In his review of Hosmer's work, historian and officer of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation James Short wrote, "This book cannot be said to supersede any previous history of American preservation, because there has not been one." Similarly, Colonial Williamsburg archivist Lester Cappon said, "This book fills a need, long felt by scholar and layman, for a comprehensive history of preservation and restoration in the United States." Hosmer's book is notable not only for advancing the idea that historic house museum preservation was tied to the building of American identity and nationalism but also for being the first thorough work of its kind.³

The most important study of historic preservation is Patricia West's *Domesticating History*. West, who would go on to become codirector of the Center for Applied Historical Research and a curator in the National Park Service, focused her work on four house museums: George Washington's Mount Vernon, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and the Booker T. Washington Birthplace. She tracked the general narrative of the house museum from its early days being run largely by female volunteers through the professionalization of the industry. She focused on how American culture and politics was reflected in the trajectory of the house museum, setting a precedent for several works that followed her study. Notably, she turned a critical eye towards the early founding of house museums and demonstrated how the hagiography that they perpetuated about American Founding Fathers was a product of nationalism.⁴

³ Lester J. Cappon, review of *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* by Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *The American Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (January 1967): 682.; James R. Short, review of *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* by Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (April 1966): 341.

⁴ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1999), 133.

While Hosmer's book became the foundational work on house museums and preservation until 1999, when West's *Domesticating History* arrived, there were a number of scholars writing on the topic. Many of them were doing very specialized work geared towards one institution. Few were looking at house museums through political or cultural movement lenses. More modern work has focused on how to update historic house interpretation, like *Restoring women's history through historic preservation* by Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, and Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy's *Reimagining Historic House Museums*. Both books are a collection of essays examining different topics within historic sites, creating a nuanced view of the industry through their breadth.⁵

Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan's *Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums*, published in 2016, is a notable addition to the field. Vagnone and Ryan suggested that small adjustments will not suffice to solve the issues facing historic house museums, but rather a full-scale overhaul of the intentions and practices behind them is necessary. The work is decidedly radical, and purposefully so, but it is one of the few guides to working in historic sites that contains truly modern ideas. Clint Smith's 2021 *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* presents historic house museums in a unique light. The writer used populist, readable language to explore how historic sites across the United States (and one in Africa) portray slavery and the history of Black Americans, taking an honest and open approach to how historic sites need to improve.⁶

⁵ Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy, eds., *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and proven solutions* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, eds., *Restoring women's history through historic preservation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁶ Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, *Anarchist Guide to Historic House Museums* (New York: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2016); Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021).

Thus far, the historiography around house museums has focused largely both on the early years of their existence and on providing practical guides for those working in these institutions. However, many of these works focus on large-scale historic such as Monticello and Mount Vernon, that are not directly relevant to the average small-sized historic house that predominates the landscape. Works on the founding of other sites affirm the hagiography of Founding Fathers that is reflected in the founding of the Joel Lane Museum House. The guides to better museum practice reflect the same principles that have shaped the Joel Lane Museum House's changes over the last two decades. Both types of sources confirm that the Joel Lane Museum House has followed the general trajectory of many historic house museums of its size and type.

The History of House Museums

When first conceptualized in the United States, historic house museums were to celebrate and preserve the lives of famous American men, particularly presidents. The establishment of George Washington's Mount Vernon as a museum and the work of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association set the precedent for interpretation for many years. Early historic sites often relegated the interpretation of women to the sidelines and sometimes completely ignored the presence of enslaved people in their histories. Such interpretation, which did not give a full or accurate depiction of life at the site, persisted throughout the twentieth century.⁷

Early house museums exclusively focused on famous men (and occasionally women) who had owned them. In the words of historian Barbara Howe in "Women in the Nineteenth-Century Preservation Movement" (2003), "If the early preservationists saved a slave cabin, it

⁷ Mary A. Van Balgooy, "Interpreting Women's Lives at Historic House Museums," in *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 171.

was because it was on the grounds of Mount Vernon, not because they consciously preserved and interpreted a site related to African American history.” The mission of historic sites in their early years was often patriotic, lionizing American heroes often at the expense of historical accuracy.⁸

Historian Patricia West pointed out the irony of women, often the primary preservationists of historic house museums, largely neglecting women’s history in site interpretations. Even the ways in which house museums used spaces often prohibited interpretation of women’s roles in the historic household, as administrative offices and storage spaces occupied areas that were “the heart of the working house.” When women were represented, their stories were often as leisurely and supportive wives of important men, with little regard for their labor or the labor of the other women surrounding them. Recent attempts to broaden interpretation more inclusively have become politicized. Still, the inclusion only of wealthy white men is itself a political statement. West stated, “Presenting the ‘main,’ usually male, historical occupant of a house as having been disconnected from wider social world—from women, servants, or slaves; from the poor side of town—is a highly political yet utterly familiar approach.” Putting women back into the narrative does not seem inherently political, but it certainly has become such.⁹

The depiction of enslaved people at early historic house museums was no better. Often, interpreters left the enslaved out of the narrative by using passive language like “The fields were planted” or “The food was served.” If referenced, enslaved people’s legal categorization was not. Sites often avoided the implications of their patriarchs’ enslaving of human beings by calling them “servants.” Depicting the cruelty of slavery was at odds with the deification of American

⁸ Barbara J. Howe, “Documenting the History of Women in Preservation: Women in the Nineteenth-Century Preservation Movement,” in *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 18, 28.

⁹ Howe, “Documenting the History of Women in Preservation,” 83, 84, 85.

heroes that sustained many historic sites. West explained that, especially after World War I, house museums turned their purposes to encourage patriotism. “In the hypernationalistic postwar era,” she concluded, “the utility of the house museum as patriotic medium and the desire to turn away from European aesthetics toward ‘Americana’ fostered a boom in both the creation of historic ‘shrines’ and the collection of American antiques.” As a result, historic house museums wanted to portray their historical occupants, in particular the founding generation, in the best light. Slavery could not be part of that conversation. There was no detailing of Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings or George Washington’s dogged pursuit of his runaway enslaved woman Oney Judge.¹⁰

When Monticello first opened as a museum in the 1920s, Black men dressed in livery (to replicate the outfits worn by the enslaved men who worked in the house while Jefferson lived there) served as tour guides. Certainly, putting Black men in the costume of slavery for an audience of mostly white visitors was emotionally damaging, and the exclusion of stories about the Black enslaved people who lived and worked exacerbated that trauma. Not until 1951 did white women replace costumed Black men as tour guides, a decision that some visitors resented.¹¹

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, interpretation at historic house museums across the country has undergone a shift. The famous white men for whom the houses are often named have not lost prominence, but their stories have been expanded with more inclusive and holistic narratives of what life in their houses would have looked like. Such interpretations increasingly added information about women of all classes, lower-class men, enslaved people, free Black domestic workers, and LGBTQ+ people.

¹⁰ West, *Domesticating History*, 93.

¹¹ Smith, *How the Word is Passed*, 47.

Naturally, this progress has not been entirely linear, and sites have moved at different paces. Some sites today remain with the interpretative style of the early to mid-twentieth century, while others have shifted focus entirely away from the men whom they once deified. Such change away from the white male-centric narratives that dominated historic house museum interpretations will take time and will likely look slightly different for every site, but it is vital to the continued relevance of historic house museums that they appeal to as many people as possible.

Structure and Argument

“‘The Best House for 100 Miles’: The History of the Joel Lane Museum House” is a detailed history of the Joel Lane Museum House under the Colonial Dames of America. It presents the museum’s history as exemplary of the changes that have taken place in the field of historic house museums since the mid-twentieth century. It is informed by copious research, interviews with former employees, and my own personal experience as an intern and a volunteer at the Joel Lane Museum House. In Chapter 1: “The Joel Lane House Before the Dames,” I detail the history of the house from its construction in 1769 until it was purchased by the Dames in 1927. I include a short biography of Joel Lane and information about the owners of the house after Joel Lane, and more expansive history of all those who lived in the house and on the land once part of the Lane Plantation. The second chapter, “The House Under Colonial Dame Management,” provides information about the organization of the Colonial Dames and their use of the house before it became a museum, including as a headquarters for the North Carolina Colonial Dames and the Works Progress Administration programs that it hosted in the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 3, “A House Becomes a Historic Site,” addresses the opening of the Joel Lane Museum House to the public and its first few decades operating as a historic house museum. I

examine early interpretation presented at the site, the involvement of the Colonial Dames in dictating the site's historical narrative, and the tenure of the first few museum directors. This chapter addresses the opening of the Visitors Center and the formation of the site website. The final chapter, "A Historic House Faces Modernity," follows the museum through the current director's tenure. Elena "Lanie" Hubbard became Director of the Joel Lane Museum House in 2017, following several years working as a docent. She has been at the helm of trying to update the historic house to "best museum practices." The chapter explores the monument to the enslaved and updates to interpretation.

This work is the first of its kind about the Joel Lane Museum House, whose long and varied history has never been formally recorded. This study demonstrates that the history of the museum serves as a compelling example of the larger history of the historic house museum from its amateur opening through professionalization and shifting interpretation. It is a worthwhile case study because of how well it illuminates larger trends in the public history industry.

CHAPTER ONE

The Joel Lane House before the Dames

Joel Lane, Father of Raleigh

Joel Lane has been called the “Father of Raleigh” and the “Father of Wake County” interchangeably, though both seem to bestow perhaps more credit upon him than he deserves. Many of the details of Lane’s life are unknown or questionable; he did not leave behind many solid records, aside from those that mark his political involvement and those showing his sales and deeds. Two biographies of him have been written—Marshall de Lancey Haywood’s *Joel Lane, Pioneer and Patriot: A Biographical Sketch* (1900) and Jerry L. Cross’s *Chameleon on the Crabtree: The Story of Joel Lane* (2001). Each carries its own biases.¹

Lane was born near modern-day Halifax, North Carolina, in 1739. As a young man, he held several political titles in the coastal region before moving to the largely uninhabited Piedmont area in the early 1760s. In 1762, he married Martha Hinton, the daughter of Colonel John Hinton. The couple had three sons—Henry, James, and William—before Martha’s early death in 1771. Within a year, he had remarried Martha’s younger sister, Mary Hinton.²

Joel and Mary had nine children, though two daughters did not live beyond early childhood. While Joel enlarged his family, he was also establishing one of the largest plantations in the area. In 1769, he completed the building of the home known today as the Joel Lane House, which was impressive for the time and place, despite looking modest to modern eyes. In addition

¹ Jerry L. Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree: The Story of Joel Lane*, Joel Lane Museum House (2001): 36; Marshall De Lancey Haywood, *Joel Lane, Pioneer and Patriot: A Biographical Sketch* (Raleigh: Alford, Bynum & Christophers, 1900).

² “Colonel Joel Lane,” *Joel Lane Museum House*, accessed January 8, 2023, https://www.joellane.org/history/joel-lane/colonel_joel_lane; Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 2-3.

to growing wheat and corn, he likely had apple orchards and kept a flock of sheep. He also operated a tavern, although the location of the building is unclear.³

But Lane's aspirations went beyond those of a farmer, and he held a myriad of positions in local government. While serving as a representative from Johnston County to the Colonial Assembly in New Bern, he introduced a bill in 1770 to create a new county to be comprised of parts of Johnston, Orange, and Cumberland counties. The region's expanding population, including Lane, wanted their own courthouse so that they would no longer have to travel to Hillsborough to do business. Wake County took shape on March 12, 1771, seemingly named after Governor Tryon's wife, Margaret Wake. Lane earned the title of "Father of Wake County" because he was the one to introduce the bill into the assembly.⁴

Lane served as a representative to the Colonial Assembly for Wake County in 1773, as well as a colonel in the militia and a senator in the North Carolina General Assembly for eleven years in the 1780s and 1790s. He also was a justice of the peace for both Johnston and Wake counties. During the Revolutionary War, he served as a delegate to the Provincial Congress and as a member of the Council of Safety. While he had family who fought in the war, there is no documentation to suggest that he ever saw battle. Instead, he served in administrative roles, including distributing salt to the local soldiers. His house also served as a meeting place during the war when it was thought unsafe for the fledgling government to convene in the more populated coastal towns.⁵

In 1788, Lane acted as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Hillsborough and voted not to ratify the new Constitution. Like many North Carolina delegates, he objected to the

³ Elizabeth Reid Murray, *Wake: Capital County of North Carolina (Volume 1)* (Raleigh, NC: Capital County Publishing Company, 1983), 35; Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 16-17.

⁴ Murray, *Wake*, 41, 42, 44; Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 11.

⁵ Murray, *Wake*, 60, 71; Haywood, *Joel Lane*, 12.

document, which did not include a Bill of Rights. The following year, at the second North Carolina Constitutional Convention, he voted to ratify the document, which had a Bill of Rights added.⁶

Lane is best remembered as being the owner of the land that became downtown Raleigh. In 1792, as the state sought a new place to put the capital, its commissioners eventually settled on a piece of land near Isaac Hunter's tavern in Wake County. Lane not only offered a tract of his land for purchase but also agreed to house the commissioners while they inspected others lands that several men had suggested. The first two rounds of voting were inconclusive, but a third vote chose Lane's one thousand acres for the new capital city. Raleigh officially began on December 31, 1792. Lane also attempted to sell land to the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, of which he was a member, to form the first university campus, but he was unsuccessful.⁷

Joel Lane died on March 29, 1795, and his wife, Mary, followed only a few days later. It is not known what caused their deaths. They left behind six underaged children, including the heir to the plantation, ten-year-old Thomas. Although Lane had certainly participated in local politics, connected to many of the important men of North Carolina, and been a plantation owner and enslaver, there is little reason for his home to have survived. There were other men of significance in the area, such as John Hinton and Nathaniel Jones. Lane's legacy, aside from having sold the land that became North Carolina's capital, is largely steeped in the lucky survival of his house, as it gives us a glimpse into how wealthy colonial residents of the Piedmont region lived.⁸

⁶ Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 26-27.

⁷ Murray, *Wake*, 77, 79, 80, 85; Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 29-33.

⁸ Cross, *Chameleon on the Crabtree*, 34.

Community

While the house museum bears Joel Lane's name, and its early interpretation focused on him, Lane was far from the only person to inhabit the plantation in the late eighteenth century. Lane had a large family: he had twelve children by two wives—both daughters of John Hinton. His six sons and six daughters were so spread out in age that they never lived in the house at the same time. By the time the youngest children were born, Lane's four eldest sons had already been granted tracts of his extensive landholdings for themselves. Lane's four daughters who survived to adulthood all married, and all but one settled in North Carolina. Several of Lane's children moved to Tennessee in adulthood, and many Lane descendants live there to this day.⁹

But a larger community on the Lane plantation was that of the enslaved people whom Lane owned. During his lifetime, records show that he enslaved forty-two people, although it is possible that there are others whose names have been lost to history. There was also an enslaved boy named Hercules who had been willed to Lane's eldest son, Henry, in his grandfather's will, who lived on the plantation until Henry came of age and moved out of his father's home around 1785. These enslaved people cared for and harvested crops and livestock, cooked and cleaned for the Lanes, did weaving and metalsmithing, and all the manual labor necessary for a large colonial plantation.¹⁰

When Joel and his wife died within days of each other, executors broke up the enslaved community. In Joel Lane's will, he left each of his younger children a few enslaved people along with some possessions and tracts of land for the boys. The Lane children and their guardians tore

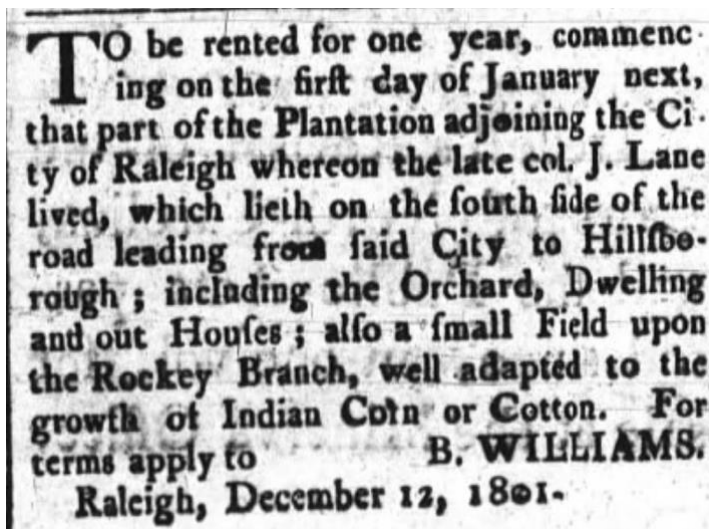
⁹ "Descendants," *Joel Lane Museum House*, accessed January 8, 2023, <https://www.joellane.org/history/joel-lane/descendants>

¹⁰ Murray, *Wake*, 120.

the enslaved families apart. Many remained in Raleigh; others accompanied their new owners to new homes in far-off places. Some reunited decades later; others never reconciled.¹¹

The House under Others' Ownership

When Joel Lane died, he left the house and plantation to his eldest unestablished son, Thomas. However, Thomas was only ten years old at the time and without a parent to run the plantation for him until he reached his majority. He first lived with his elder half-brother Henry and then, following Henry's early death two years later, given over to his cousin, Martin Lane. Advertisements in the *Raleigh Minerva* in 1801 show that executors rented out the house during Thomas's ownership.¹²



TO be rented for one year, commencing on the first day of January next, that part of the Plantation adjoining the City of Raleigh whereon the late col. J. Lane lived, which lieth on the south side of the road leading from said City to Hillsborough; including the Orchard, Dwelling and out Houses; also a small Field upon the Roeky Branch, well adapted to the growth of Indian Corn or Cotton. For terms apply to B. WILLIAMS. Raleigh, December 12, 1801.

Figure 1: Advertisement for the Renting of the Joel Lane House.
Source: B. Williams, *The Raleigh Minerva*, December 22, 1801.

In 1808, Thomas sold the house to his brother-in-law, Dr. Allen Gilchrist, husband of Dorothy Lane. The Gilchrists lived in the house with their children until 1813, when they sold

¹¹ Will of Colonel Joel Lane, October 1794, Wake County Court Records, Joel Lane Museum House collection, Raleigh, NC.

¹² Guardianship records of Thomas Lane, September 20, 1797, Joel Lane Museum House collection; B. Williams, *The Raleigh Minerva*, December 22, 1801.

the house to a Scottish attorney, Peter Browne, who owned it for the following five years. Raleigh legend is that Browne removed the Lane family headstones from their burial ground to plant cabbages. He, like the remains found in what may have once been that family burial ground, are today buried in Raleigh's City Cemetery.¹³

William Boylan bought the house in 1818, and it remained in that family until 1919. Had its original owner not had the title of "Father of Raleigh," very possibly, the house would have been interpreted as the Boylan House instead. At some point, the Boylans added a west addition (used as the Visitors Center today). William Boylan made his name as the editor of the *Minerva*, a Raleigh newspaper, but also served as a member of the General Assembly, the treasurer of the North Carolina Agricultural Society, and a planter. In 1818, he sold his share of the newspaper and decided to transform the Lane plantation into a cotton farm. It was likely under his tenure that the plantation became known as "Wakefield."¹⁴

William Boylan's daughter Kate was born in the house and lived in it her entire life. She owned the house following her father's death in 1861. Upon her death in 1895, she willed it to her brother William and niece Adelaide Boylan Snow. In 1914, the Boylans relocated the house from its original location to its current one. The reasons for doing so are not well-documented. During the move, they relocated the original west wing addition to the rear of the house, and they had the original chimneys destroyed and replaced with smaller versions.¹⁵

In 1919, Josephine Boylan Van Patten and her husband, E. H. Patten, sold the house to R. H. Merritt, who held onto it before selling it to The Colonial Dames of Wake County. The

¹³ Haywood, *Joel Lane*, 21, 22; Teresa Merck and Alicia Pandimos, "Joel Lane House Independent Study," Summer 2002, Joel Lane Museum House collection.

¹⁴ Craig Thompson Friend, "The Story of Lunsford Lane," unpublished manuscript, 161, 162, in possession of author.

¹⁵ "In Memoriam: Kate Boylan," *News & Observer*, August 20, 1895; Merck and Pandimos, "Joel Lane House Independent Study."

Colonial Dames, recognizing the historical importance of the house, bought it to ensure its preservation, although it would be many more years before they restored the house to make it into a museum for the public.¹⁶

¹⁶ Merck and Pandimos, "Joel Lane House Independent Study."

CHAPTER TWO

The House under Colonial Dame Management

Who Are the Colonial Dames?

The Colonial Dames is an exclusive membership society founded in 1890 as “a patriotic organization to engage in educational and commemorative works.” Membership is based on being able to trace ancestry to colonial Americans who held public office, were commissioned officers, or otherwise “rendered efficient service to our country during the colonial period.” Through a strict set of eligibility rules, the group is invitation-only and requires documentation to prove ancestry.¹

The society’s mission in the 1890s included identifying historic sites. By the mid-twentieth century, the Colonial Dames’ mission expanded to preserving and upkeeping historic homes that illuminate American history. The society today owns a considerable number of historic sites across the nation and operates them for public visitation. The society, which boasts over fifteen thousand members, is divided into forty-four corporate societies in forty-three states and Washington, DC.²

The North Carolina chapter of the Colonial Dames of America arose in 1894. The last of the original thirteen states to do so, the North Carolina division has since grown to be the largest chapter, comprised of over seventeen hundred women. Today, the North Carolina chapter owns

¹ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 2016, Joel Lane Museum House Collection, Raleigh, NC; William Seale, *Domestic Views* (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects Press, 1992), 7; The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, “About The NSCDA,” accessed December 3, 2022, <https://nscda.org/about-us/membership-inquiries/>.

² Seale, *Domestic Views*, 7; Colonial Dames, “About The NSCDA.”

four properties: the Burgwin-Wright House & Gardens in Wilmington, the Fourth House in Winston Salem, Haywood Hall in Raleigh, and the Joel Lane House.³

In 1992, William Seale and photographer Erick Kvalsvik composed a photograph collection of the houses owned by the Colonial Dames, titled *Domesticating Views: Historic Properties Owned or Supported by the National Society of Colonial Dames of America*. The book offers insight into a largely mysterious organization. It opens with the statement, “If the history of Europe lives in the great churches and palaces of its past, American history finds continuing expression in old houses.” The organization, founded for patriotic purposes, discovered its own patriotic *raison d’être* in preserving historic homes as its integral way to express that patriotism.⁴

Seale cited the early influence of Williamsburg and a tendency to romanticize the past as the main motivating factors in the Dames’ acquisition of houses between the 1930s and 1960s. The early house museums often operated more “as monuments and shrines” to supposedly great men rather than as museums. By the 1960s and 1970s, a more focused push from within the industry to run the houses as legitimate museums forced the Dames to follow suit.⁵

What to Do with an Old House

After the North Carolina chapter of the Colonial Dames of America bought the Joel Lane House in 1927, the natural question arose as to what to do with it. Event notices in the *News & Observer* through the 1930s and 1940s show the house used as a meeting space for both the Colonial Dames and the Daughters of the American Revolution. (There is, predictably, some

³ The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. “History,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.ncdames.org/history>.

⁴ Seale, *Domestic Views*, 1.

⁵ Seale, *Domestic Views*, 6, 7.

overlap between the two legacy groups.) It also served as an event space for public lectures. For example, Ruth Cannon, wife of cotton manufacturer Charles A. Cannon, delivered a talk about “Old Homes and Gardens of North Carolina” in April 1944.⁶

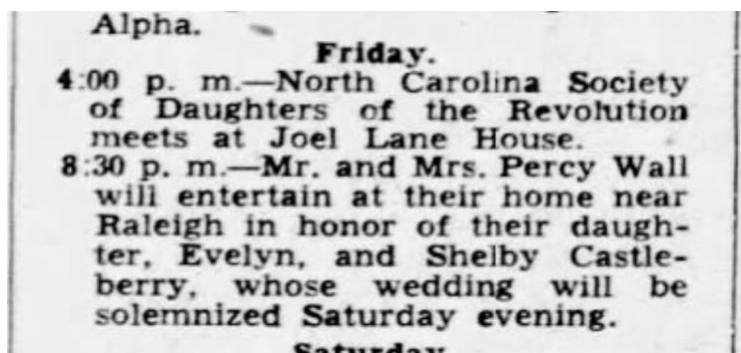


Figure 2: An Event listing from the *News & Observer* for a DAR meeting.
Source: "Social Calendar," *News & Observer*, June 6, 1939.

The house opened to the general public for the first time on November 30, 1927, and a reporter from the *News & Observer* faithfully recounted the event. Two to three hundred people visited. Residents of Wake County had lent furniture and artifacts from the colonial period, including a letter from George Washington and a chessboard once owned by Benjamin Franklin. The open house followed renovations to the property. The reporter noted that “the Colonial Dames have faithfully adhered to the style of the period, seeking to restore it to its original state as nearly as possible. The result is pleasing.” The article announced that the house served as headquarters for the Dames, in addition to being “open to the public,” although it is unclear in what capacity it was meant to be available. The house hosted special events over the following few decades. On April 23 and 24, 1941, for example, the Dames held an antiques exhibition,

⁶ “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, June 6, 1939; “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, September 23, 1930; “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, December 29, 1927; “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, June 1, 1927; “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, May 26, 1937; “Social Calendar,” *News & Observer*, September 24, 1946; “Mrs. Cannon to Talk at DAR Meeting,” *News & Observer*, April 2, 1944; 1940 US Census: Wake County, NC.

charging a small fee for visitors to see “antique glass, silver, and china.” As with many of the Dames’ events, the exhibition was to earn money for the house’s continued restoration.⁷

In the early 1940s, the Dames found another purpose for the house, one whose effects can still be seen today. The National Youth Administration was a New Deal agency focused on training and providing work for people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five years old. The Dames hosted classes for young men at the Joel Lane House where they learned about historic restoration, furniture construction, and how to use power tools. In May 1942, a workshop on how to make silkscreen posters and armbands for the Army and Navy took place at the Joel Lane House, sponsored by the National Youth Administration. Such investments in training young men ultimately paid off. In 1941, the local newspapers reported that restoration work had been completed by the men of the National Youth Administration. Those working at the house today believe that some of the woodwork of the interior walls of the house dates to those New Deal-era restorations.⁸

Between 1927 and the opening of the house as a museum in 1976, the later addition to the house was sometimes rented to people to live in. Often, these residents had access to the original part of the house. The rent money helped with the upkeep of the buildings, but renting to inhabitants ensured that someone was on the grounds safeguarding the Dames’ investments.⁹

⁷ “Furnish Ancient House with Antiques for Day,” *News & Observer*, December 1, 1927; “Wake Colonial Dames to Exhibit Antiques,” *News & Observer*, April 19, 1941.

⁸ “Business Meet Held by Colonial Dames,” *News & Observer*, May 31, 1942; “Colonial Dames Meet at Joel Lane House,” *News & Observer*, October 22, 1941.

⁹ Belle Long, Zoom interview, February 3, 2023, transcript in possession of author.

The Road to Opening a Museum

By the late 1960s, the Colonial Dames were ready to commit time and resources to open the Joel Lane house as a historic house museum. In 1969 and 1971, they received grants from the North Carolina Legislature—\$25,000 altogether—to put towards the house’s full restoration. Since many of the Dames were wealthy, they contributed significant donations themselves. By 1972, the total estimated cost of the restoration approached \$98,000, according to a *News & Observer* article updating the progress of the restoration. The author recounted how the chimneys, foundation, and siding on the house had been completed, and new hand-split shingles were ready to be placed on the roof. Dodge and Beckwith, a Raleigh architectural firm, served as the leads on the project, with A.L. Honeycutt, Jr. as the restoration supervisor.¹⁰

Progress towards the opening of the museum rolled slowly over the next few years, as there was much work to be done. In July 1969, the Dames applied to have the house put onto the National Register of Historic Places, noting that, although it was occupied, the building was in the process of being restored for less residential purposes. The application stressed Joel Lane’s many political positions and the historical and political importance of the house.¹¹

In 1971, the Dames acquired their first major piece of furniture for the house: a china press purchased in an auction in November and previously located at the Hinsdale House on Hillsborough Street. The Dames continued to hold benefits, including a fashion show luncheon with clothing by Ellisberg’s department store in September 1973. In November 1972, the Dames had the house designated as a Raleigh Historic Site. The following year, Edward F. Turberg, a

¹⁰ Jo Woestendier, “Joel Lane House in Last Stages of Restoration,” *News & Observer*, November 26, 1972; Teresa Merck and Alicia Pandimos, “Joel Lane House Independent Study,” Summer 2002, Joel Lane Museum House collection, Raleigh NC.

¹¹ Merck and Pandimos, “Joel Lane House Independent Study.”

restoration specialist in the state's Division of Archives and History, completed a paint study on the exterior of the house.¹²

The most significant event to occur before the museum opened was the reinterment of Joel Lane and his family in City Cemetery. On March 30, 1974, amidst much pomp and circumstance, remains found five years earlier near the original site of the house on Boylan Avenue, were buried in a marked grave. It is not known if Joel Lane's remains were among those reburied that day, but the reinterment and accompanying ceremony assumed as much and testified to a sustained interest in Joel Lane and his family symbolized by the restoration work on the house.¹³

¹² "China Press Goes on Public Exhibit," *News & Observer*, April 9, 1972; Merck and Pandimos, "Joel Lane House Independent Study."

¹³ Ernie Wood, "Muskets' Roar Signals Lane Family Reburial," *News & Observer*, March 31, 1974.

CHAPTER THREE

A House Becomes a Historic Site

The Opening of the Museum

The Joel Lane Museum House officially opened on April 22, 1976. Descendant James E. Thiem dressed in costume to portray Joel Lane, and the Pershing Rifles from North Carolina State University acted as a colonial regiment, standing at attention through the opening ceremony. About 250 people attended to hear speakers, partake in refreshments, and see the newly-restored house. The chancellor of North Carolina State University, John T. Caldwell, spoke, and Mrs. Francis Winslow, chairman of the State Committee for the Restoration of the Joel Lane House, received a key to the city from the mayor.¹



*Figure 3: Colonial Dames in period costume on the Opening Day of the museum in 1976.
Source: Photograph of Costumed Women, April 22, 1976, Joel Lane Museum House Collection, Raleigh, NC.*

Not comfortable resting on their laurels, the Dames immediately set about with the next set of improvements to the site. They hired Donald Parker from Colonial Williamsburg to design

¹ Ernie Wood, "Joel Lane House is Opened," *News & Observer*, April 23, 1976; *The Robesonian*, 20 September 1976.

a formal colonial garden, which was unveiled on April 23, 1978. They had a historic building from across Wake County moved to the property a little over a year later to serve as the kitchen building.²

The Colonial Dames composed the museum's original Board of Directors, although it later expanded to include people who are not Dames. The Board had a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, and eventually evolved to include chairs for various departments from garden upkeep to education. There is also an Executive Committee whose role changed over the years. The president originally served for two-year terms; today, they only serve for one.³

One of the largest updates to the museum occurred on April 23, 2007, when the addition to the house opened as the new visitors center. When the Dames restored the house in the 1970s, they anticipated that a first-floor office would serve as the museum's visitors center. Where Joel Lane once worked became a small space for the museum's tour operations. Builders added a small bathroom and tiny kitchen behind a false wall, maintaining the eighteenth-century appearance while providing necessary facilities for those working at the museum.⁴

Over the years, the in-house office grew insufficient. The old west wing, which had been moved to sit apart from the house rather than directly behind where it had been placed after the first relocation of the house, became the new visitor's center. It had been rented out as an apartment for decades, and the money it earned provided a main source of income. However, when Charlotte Purrington served as chapter president, the chapter decided to stop renting the

² Merck and Pandimos, "Joel Lane House Independent Study," Summer 2002, Joel Lane Museum House collection, Raleigh NC.

³ Belle Long, Zoom interview, February 3, 2023, transcript in possession of author

⁴ Kathy Ruse, phone interview February 3, 2023, transcript in possession of the author.

house. Former director Belle Long described the decision as “a scary leap forward,” explaining that they were unsure if it was financially responsible.⁵

The opening of the visitors center represented a large step forward for the museum. Dame Elizabeth “Sis” Cheshire performed the ribbon cutting on April 23. The room in the house once occupied by the museum administration became part of the historic tours as Joel Lane’s office. The gift shop, formally relegated to a cupboard in the kitchen building, moved to the larger space, allowing the Dames to expand their stock from Colonial Dames playing cards and recipe books to colonial crafts, children’s toys, and books.⁶

Professionalization

For many years, volunteers ran the museum. Dames were required to volunteer regularly and gave tours on Sunday afternoons. By the end of the 1980s, the society hired two Dames as paid docents to provide tours on Tuesdays. Reliance on volunteers, whether Dames or local men and women interested in colonial history, could not provide the needed labor, however. The house museum has always had an unusual schedule for tours, unable to pay docents enough or recruit enough volunteers to offer tours full-time.⁷

The first professional curator of the museum was LeRae Umfleet, who worked at the Joel Lane Museum House from 1999 to 2003. She received her Bachelor’s in history from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and her Master’s from the Archival Management program at North Carolina State University (the predecessor of today’s Public History program).

⁵ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

⁶ Invitation to Opening of Visitors Center, March 2007, Joel Lane Museum House collection, Raleigh, NC; Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

⁷ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

Before coming to the Joel Lane Museum House, she spent five years working at the Historic Hope Plantation in Windsor, North Carolina.⁸

One challenge faced by the head of the paid staff was a lack of definition as to what tasks fall under the domain of the President of the Board and which belonged to the paid and volunteer staff. They also must navigate working with a team of mostly volunteers. Umfleet worked toward making the museum more professional and sought to expand its interpretation by adding information about the enslaved community that had lived on Joel Lane's plantation.⁹

The museum's early mission had been to "interpret and promote this 18th century Wake County historic site in order to educate the public about the history, architecture, and culture of the colonial period and about the significance of its owner, Joel Lane, 'founding father of Raleigh and Wake County.'" Lane himself was the focus of the earliest tours given at the site in the 1970s and 1980s, which also focused on the artifacts and architecture of the house.¹⁰

In the earliest days of tours at the Joel Lane Museum House, there was not much of a script from which docents were to work. What did exist was steeped in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century patriotic fervor for Lane. The 1994 docent guide included a lot of information about the architecture of the house and Joel Lane's involvement in North Carolina politics. It detailed many of the antique artifacts in the house. It also included a section on Joel Lane's personality that claimed that he was "kind to his slaves," citing how he "did not break up existing families" in his will as justification for the claim. A section on "Farm and Plantation Life" contained one paragraph about women's work and a reference to the ownership of enslaved people but no discussion of how either women or Black laborers contributed to life on the

⁸ LeRae Umfleet, Zoom interview, February 17, 2023, transcript in possession of the author.

⁹ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

¹⁰ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 1994, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

plantation. A children's tour script from 1994 placed importance on Joel Lane's political life and the antiques inside of the house, as well as highlighting the restoration of the house. There was some attempt to provide information about life in the colonial period, such as discussing letters and tea and children's toys, but not a single mention of slavery. There was a reference to a "servant" being given a task and a "cook" in the kitchen, but no mention that these workers were there involuntarily, that they were owned.¹¹

One of Umfleet's goals at the museum was to update interpretation in all its forms, from rewriting the tour scripts to rearranging the collection. She said she wanted to "bring [the museum] into the twenty-first century" and that her goal was to increase accuracy in their storytelling wherever possible. Umfleet was the one to commission Jerry Cross to write his biography of Joel Lane.¹²

Former docent and Assistant Director Kathy Ruse remembered Umfleet's embarrassment with the original version of the tour script, before she had a chance to rewrite it. Those early Colonial Dame volunteers could choose which parts of the house's history they wanted to share, often leaving Lane's slave-ownership and other less palatable topics out of the narrative. Umfleet's challenge, then, expanded beyond just tweaking official interpretation: she had to inspire a change of heart and memory in the volunteer corps.¹³

And yet, myth is powerful and, despite Umfleet's intentions, continued to dictate the site's interpretation. A tour script from sometime in the early 2000s focused on Joel Lane's life and the items in the house, mentioning women only in the context of taking tea in the parlor while men did business in another room. This was a purposeful exclusion because, in one space,

¹¹ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 1994; Children's Tour Script, 1994, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

¹² Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

¹³ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

women's work and childbirth were possible topics. The word "slave" appeared only twice, once to denote that an enslaved nanny would have slept on the cot in the children's room and another to note that the "cooking was done by a slave." A longer version of the tour script from the same era provided more information about Joel Lane but only two more mentions of the women in his family and no additional material about the enslaved people who lived on his property.¹⁴

Much of the interpretive change that finally occurred resulted from the work of volunteer Florence Mitchell. A trained historian, Mitchell researched the enslaved community who had lived on the Lane plantation, adding extensively to what was already known about them. She aspired to increase the accuracy of the tours by providing the sort of thorough research the Dames, few of them versed in historical methods, could complete themselves.¹⁵

In February 2009, *News & Observer* reporter Kristin Collins criticized North Carolina's historic sites for not mentioning the history of the enslaved. She called out the Joel Lane House by name, stating that those giving tours seemed uncomfortable with its history as a plantation. However, she did note that under Belle Long's tenure as director, which began in 2007, they had begun to talk about slavery. Collins cited a study from East Carolina University that showed most North Carolina historic sites did not mention slavery, or minimized its place in interpretation for greater emphasis on architecture and gardens. Collins situated the Joel Lane House as a middle ground between Stagville Plantation, which did an excellent job of embracing its history, and Meredith Hall, which insisted that not all slave owning was bad.¹⁶

¹⁴ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, early 2000s, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

¹⁵ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

¹⁶ Kristin Collins, "Slave history often whitewashed," *News & Observer*, February 11, 2009.

Events

Since its beginning as a museum, the Joel Lane Museum House hosted special events. Christmas and Fourth of July open houses continue to be free of charge, with self-guided tours of the house, crafts, and free refreshments. Umfleet expanded the Fourth of July event beyond having a station at the Capitol's festivities to welcoming people into the Joel Lane Museum House itself. The grounds fill with volunteers in colonial costumes, ready to answer questions from visitors. Such events reinforce a sense of community within the neighborhood and provide an opportunity for people to discover the museum, some of whom might later become donors or volunteers.¹⁷

The museum has hosted lectures by staff members, professors, amateur historians, and authors. For example, "Money in Colonial America" and "Promoting Heritage Tourism Through the Preservation of City-Owned Cemeteries" were fare in 2008. Sometimes directly tied to Joel Lane or the Lane plantation, lectures are just as often generally about colonial history or the preservation of historic sites. The museum also hosts special events like "Lizzie Lane's Colonial Tea," in which children attended a tea party with crafts, Scottish reel lessons, and lectures on colonial etiquette.¹⁸

The museum established a relationship with Camp Flintlock, a local camp founded in 1999 that teaches children about life during the colonial era while allowing them to dress, cook, and do activities inspired by the late eighteenth century. Although Camp Flintlock's home base is outside of Raleigh, by 2008, the camp conducted its day sessions on the grounds of the Joel Lane Museum House. During a few weeks a year, the garden filled with tents, young chatter, and the sound of fifes. Holding their day camp at the Joel Lane House Museum provided a suitably

¹⁷ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

¹⁸ "Lizzie Lane's Colonial Tea" pamphlet, 2008, Joel Lane Museum House collection.

colonial setting but also made it easier for parents to drop off and pick up their children. The partnership gave free publicity for the museum and inspired future visitation from a group of children passionate about colonial history and likely to encourage their families to visit the museum. The museum additionally interacted with students by hosting field trips and traveling to classrooms to do in-school presentations.¹⁹

In addition to events hosted by the museum, the Joel Lane House functioned as an event venue, popular for charming colonial architecture and convenient location near downtown Raleigh. Weddings, concerts, and other events occurred in the house and on the property, catered before the creation of the Visitors Center from the small kitchen in Joel Lane's office. For such events, the furniture and artifacts from the rooms on the ground floor of the house had to be moved into the first-floor bedroom, which was closed to visitors. Belle Long described the process of fitting period furniture into that room as "like Tetris." Over time, Long became concerned about the wear and tear that hosting events took on the antique furniture, as well as potential damage to the house itself. Kathy Ruse remembered one incident in which a punch fountain overflowed, spewing juice onto the floor and wall. Despite difficulties, hosting events provided much-needed income for the museum in its early years.²⁰

Hoping to bring a more professional attitude toward the physical facilities, when Long became director of the museum in 2007, she attended workshops on historic house preservation and set about updating the Joel Lane Museum House's practices. "When I got there, I said no more," she recounted about shutting down hosting events inside the house which could be

¹⁹ Ruse interview, February 3, 2023; Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

²⁰ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Ruse interview, February 3, 2023; Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

accommodated outdoors. The staff continued to use indoor spaces for their own, more closely-monitored events and rented out the garden space for outdoor gatherings.²¹

Museum Directors' Visions

Kathy Ruse worked at the Joel Lane House Museum longer than any other person and has the most knowledge of the changes it has undergone throughout the years. She moved to Raleigh with her family in 1998 and attended the Fourth of July open house because of her eldest daughter's love of Colonial Williamsburg. Her daughter signed up for the new Junior Docent program, so Ruse decided to volunteer as a docent to learn more about the site.²²

In the early 2000s, docents did a volunteer shift once a month. On slow days without tours, Ruse helped in other capacities around the museum and began to learn more about its operations. Eventually, she accepted a part-time job from the Colonial Dames to work with the online database. With an academic background in art history, she was a great fit for the job, and she ended up working at the museum for many years, eventually becoming Assistant Director.²³

Ruse was at the museum during the tenure of each curator and director that it has had, giving her a unique perspective on the evolution of the site. As with any historic site, but especially at those with a tiny staff, the vision of the director can drastically alter the sort of programming and interpretation being offered. During our interview, Ruse noted of the leaders at the Joel Lane Museum House that "everybody made some changes." Each of the handful of

²¹ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

²² Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

²³ Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

directors (or curators, as they were called in the earliest years) has left their own mark on the site.²⁴

As with most sites, change was sometimes met with resistance—the Colonial Dames are “notorious for slow change,” according to Umfleet. She described having to make updates in small increments to avoid resistance and ensure that they would be successful. Over the course of her time as Curator, as the membership of the board rotated, her relationship with them deteriorated.²⁵

In 2003, Umfleet left the curatorship, succeeded by Charles Jacobs. He had professional training in running a museum and had previously worked at the Hardin County Historical Museum and Wolcott House Museum in Ohio. However, his leadership style was disorganized and frustrating to volunteers. He had good intentions. He continually took on new tasks and asked new questions of interpretation, for example, questioning what the lives of women were like on the plantation. Ruse, who had previously stopped working at the museum, returned with the promise of working with a professional. However, after less than two years in the position, Jacobs left for personal reasons. Ruse filled in to keep the house running until a new curator could be found.²⁶

Belle Long is the daughter of a Colonial Dame who became a Dame herself. She moved to Raleigh in 1985 and joined the Wake County Committee of Dames. They were searching for a Vice President for the Board of the Joel Lane Museum House and asked Long to fill the role, promising her that it was mainly nominal and required little work. Long took the position and served on the board for several years, staying up-to-date with the museum even when she was no

²⁴ Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

²⁵ Umfleet interview, February 17, 2023.

²⁶ “Obituary: Charles M. Jacobs,” *Courier Gazette*, August 5, 2019; Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

longer tied to it in an official capacity. In 2007, when the museum needed a new curator, she stepped up to the challenge.²⁷

Long had no background in history but hoped that her MBA would lend itself well to running the business side of the museum. Both she and Ruse recounted how she told her Assistant Curator upon their first official meeting that if Ruse could handle the history part, Long would take care of the business. Ruse noted, “It’s been really fun to watch how far she’s transitioned into becoming not only comfortable with the history and research but actively involved and doing great things.”²⁸

Long changed her title from curator to director to better reflect the work that she performed in running the museum. She hired a paid docent to give tours on Saturdays and developed special tours to deliver to school children on field trips. Under Long’s tenure, the facility added a bathroom to the side of the visitors center that could be accessed without going through the indoor offices. The bathroom project “was Belle’s baby,” according to Ruse, and represented a significant update for the staff and volunteers of the museum. They also added a shed to the side of the visitors center to hold the chairs and craft supplies that no longer fit in indoor storage.²⁹

Long has a personal interest in gardening, so with the help of volunteers, she sold plants propagated from those grown on the grounds of the museum. The pomegranate tree sprigs became particularly popular. Selling plants proved to be a unique way to connect with the community, who then associated the plants growing around their houses with the Joel Lane Museum House. Purchasers occasionally stopped by to update the staff on how they were

²⁷ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

²⁸ Ruse interview, February 3, 2023; Long interview, February 3, 2023.

²⁹ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Ruse interview, February 3, 2023.

growing. Long registered the site as a nursery, a perfect example of how the director's personal vision and passions influence the trajectory of a house museum.³⁰

When asked about the challenges faced while serving as director, Long cited the difficulty of raising awareness of the site's existence and the "constant battle for money." Like many small historic house museums, funding has always been an issue for the Joel Lane Museum House, particularly because of the costly nature of operating a colonial home. Making people aware that it existed and was open for tours proved a significant difficulty, especially because it is not on a well-traveled road and is not located near other historic sites. These same problems persist today.³¹

³⁰ Long interview, February 3, 2023; Ruse, interview, February 3, 2023.

³¹ Long interview, February 3, 2023.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Historic House Faces Modernity

A New Director

After several years working as the Director of the museum, Long decided to retire. She was eventually succeeded as Director by Elena “Lanie” Hubbard, who had previously been the staff docent at the museum. Hubbard became Director in April 2017 and continues in that position to this day. Despite not having a background in historic sites, she has a Master’s in English Language and Literature and utilizes her previous experience working at a summer camp to inform programming for children. Ruse stayed on to help smooth the transition between directors before she also retired. Catherine Kimes, who graduated from nearby NC State University with a degree in History, was hired as the Assistant Director at the museum.¹

Hubbard’s time at the museum has been a period of rapid change, as she has forcibly worked to ensure that the museum is as up-to-date as possible with best practices in the field. However, she also was beset by the Covid-19 pandemic shut down only a few years into her position, and had to figure out how to make use of the time in quarantine to make plans for the museum to reopen.²

Hubbard has continued many of the practices that the museum followed under Long’s tenure, including the biannual open houses and the lecture series (though it was interrupted by Covid-19). Unlike Long, Hubbard is not a Colonial Dame herself which made initial interactions with the Dames somewhat more difficult, but they have adjusted to a suitable working dynamic.³

¹ Lanie Hubbard, ongoing conversation with the author, May 2022-February 2023; Kathy Ruse, phone interview February 3, 2023, transcript in possession of the author.

² Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

³ Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

Pushing Interpretation Forward

In more recent years, historic sites have begun to focus on including women in their interpretation. West states, “It is at the house museum that an established public audience could come to grasp one of the truisms of women’s history: that men’s lives, public and private, cannot be fully understood without reference to women, be they mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, servants, or slaves.” While many sites have maintained a focus on wealthy white men, as seen by the names by which they are called, they have adjusted to include more information about the women who surrounded these men during their lives.⁴

More sites have begun to dedicate space in their tours and website to domestic workers, either free or enslaved. The display of household goods and tools are often an effective way to introduce talking about the people who would have used them. Understanding female labor is important, particularly for sites that focus on a time period when many women did not have careers as it allows visitors to learn how much work a woman would often do without an official job title.⁵

Over the past ten years, the interpretation at the Joel Lane Museum House has been adapted to include women throughout the tour and website content. Rather than limiting the discussion of women to one space, Joel Lane’s two wives, six daughters, and numerous enslaved people are discussed throughout the property. In the herb garden, docents discuss how the mother of the family was in charge of preparing home remedies for any ailment that a family member faced. In the kitchen, the docents discuss the enslaved women who made the food for the Lane family and debunk myths about work being easier for enslaved women who worked in the house,

⁴ Patricia West, “Uncovering and Interpreting Women’s Lives at Historic Houses,” in *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, eds. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 95.

⁵ West, “Uncovering and Interpreting,” 90.

rather than the field. In the parlor, docents discuss how having the keys to the house gave women a bit of control in a world in which they were not recognized as legal entities.⁶

In the back passageway, Joel and Mary Lane's early deaths are discussed, and the lack of a will for Mary Lane is used as a way to discuss coverture laws of the time period. Upstairs, in the children's bedrooms, a handful of items are utilized to discuss the differences between boys' and girls' childhoods and to show how women dressed in the late-eighteenth century.⁷

One of my projects during my internship at the Joel Lane Museum House was to research Joel Lane's twelve children, as there was little about them included on the tour or on the website. Joel Lane had two daughters who died as children and four who lived to adulthood. The youngest, Grizelle Lane Ryan, attended the Raleigh Academy, which is an excellent tool with which to discuss female education in this time period and the changes it was going through. The eldest daughter, Martha Lane McKethan Brickell, was married soon after her parents' deaths, which can be used to facilitate a conversation around courtship and marriage.⁸

The website is being updated to reflect this content, which has also been placed into the official tour script. The handful of docents have begun integrating the research I completed into their tours. I delivered a lecture in November entitled "Joel Lane's Orphans" that detailed the lives of Joel Lane's children after his death and discussed the coverture laws (which kept single and married women from owning property, writing wills, and essentially existing in the eyes of the law) that shaped the inheritance of his property.

As the Joel Lane Museum House continues to grow and has more opportunities to engage in research, this interpretation certainly could be explored even further. Little research has been

⁶ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 2016, Joel Lane Museum House Collection, Raleigh NC.

⁷ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 2016, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

⁸ "Joel Lane's Children," updated copy to be added to website, 2022, in possession of author.

done on Joel Lane's two wives, Martha and Mary Hinton, and more information about either of them would improve the site. However, it is commendable that the tour has already shifted away from discussing Joel Lane's political exploits to including information about the women in his family.⁹

Similar to the interpretation of women's lives at historic sites, part of the challenge of updating how sites interpret enslaved workers is simply adding them into the narrative. However, talking frankly about slavery entails grappling with the morality of the white families who owned them in a way that some historic sites find challenging. In *How the Word is Passed*, Clint Smith describes his experiences at Monticello with guide David Thorson, who is committed to discussing slavery in an honest and frank manner. In talking with Smith, Thorson stated, "Despite the horror and oppression of slavery, those families who once lived here, what are they doing? They're trying to carve out some kind of a normal life." However, he also stressed the importance of telling the truth in a way that does not alienate visitors to ensure that they are still being reached. Another employee told Smith, "We're telling history by telling the full story, more of the story of everyone who lived here, not just certain people who were able to tell their stories."¹⁰

Many historic sites have embraced changes to rhetoric when referring to enslaved workers. Museums before the 1990s often used euphemistic terms like "servants" or "the help" when they referred to the enslaved if they talked about them at all. Many sites have changed to using "enslaved people" rather than "slaves" as a more respectful term. This recognizes "the personhood of men and women who had the condition of slavery forced upon them." It is an easy

⁹ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 2016, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

¹⁰ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021), 11, 13, 33, 41.

change to make and shows a dedication to remaining up-to-date on best practices. Another challenge that some sites face when trying to improve their interpretation of enslaved people's lives is pushback from their board, donors, or other financial backers. This presents a unique challenge in which public historians must sometimes work to convince the people in charge of the site that historical accuracy in discussing enslavement is necessary and that it is no longer feasible to ignore the enslaved experience to preserve the dignity of the slaveholders.¹¹

Two of the most recent directors of the Joel Lane Museum House, Long and Hubbard, have been dedicated to including as much information as possible about the lives of those who were enslaved by Joel Lane. There are forty-three people known to have been enslaved on the plantation during Joel Lane's life, though documentation for them is sparse. The museum is engaged in ongoing efforts to learn more about the enslaved population to be able to improve its interpretation, despite not having the resources to dedicate more time to research them.

However, the docents now use "enslaved person" to refer to those working on Joel Lane's land and utilize specific names when possible. Slavery is discussed throughout the tour, including in the kitchen, herb garden, and main house. It has been fully integrated into the tour script to ensure that it is not relegated to one room but rather woven into the discussion of the lives of the other people who lived on the property. While there is not much known about many of the enslaved workers who belonged to Joel Lane, efforts are being made to highlight the information that is known.¹²

The official tour script is being updated to include further analysis of Joel Lane's will to demonstrate how inheritance was wildly destructive to enslaved families and communities. It is

¹¹ Jennifer Pustz, "Listening for Silences: Stories of Enslaved and Free Domestic Workers," in *Reimagining Historic House Museums*, eds. Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. Van Balgooy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019): 163.

¹² Volunteer Tour Guide Packet, 2016, Joel Lane Museum House Collection.

also being updated to highlight the story of Lunsford Lane, an enslaved man whose father was owned by Joel Lane. Lunsford Lane bought his own freedom, moved north and became an abolitionist, and wrote an autobiography that is available for purchase in the Joel Lane gift shop. The museum's website has a section for "Slavery" in its "History" area that explores different topics related to the enslaved population. It needs more work to make sure that it's fully coherent, as some of it was added hastily during updates to the website.¹³

A Monument to the Enslaved

On February 16, 2020, a plaque was installed in the herb garden to honor the enslaved individuals who worked on the Lane plantation between 1769 and 1800. It contains the names of the enslaved and the following message:

The enslaved people who lived and labored on Joel Lane's Plantation were a community. Most were not related by blood, but they created networks of support and love to sustain them through enslavement. Following the 1795 deaths of Joel Lane and Mary Lane, this community was broken, forcibly divided by Joel Lane's will and subsequent auctions and sales."

The plaque also includes a dedication to Florence Mitchell, the volunteer who completed so much of the research about the enslaved community upon which the current interpretation is based.¹⁴

Not only does the plaque's physical presence encourage a conversation on tours about the enslaved community, but it also recognizes in writing the harm that was done to the enslaved population by the Lane family. It is a small step forward in recognizing the tragedy of enslavement that occurred on the site while Joel Lane owned it, but it represents significant

¹³ Volunteer Tour Guide Packet in progress, 2022, in possession of author; "Slavery," *Joel Lane Museum House*. Accessed January 10, 2023. <https://www.joellane.org/history/slavery>

¹⁴ Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

progress since the early days of the museum when the enslaved population were referred to as “servants” when they were mentioned at all.



Figure 4: The monument to the enslaved people at the Joel Lane Museum House. Source: Photo taken by author.

While the Joel Lane House Museum still has areas for improvement in how it interprets slavery, it does not have the issues that many larger sites have, like relegating the discussion of slavery to a special tour or continuing the use of passive language. Docents are encouraged to include the lives of the enslaved as much as possible in their tours and to use proper, up-to-date terminology and rhetoric.

Braving the Internet

One important step to bring the museum into the twenty-first century has been the creation of the website and the social media channels for the Joel Lane Museum House. The first iteration of the website was created under Jacobs’s tenure and was a very basic early 2000s-style site. When Long took over as Director, she hired a designer to create an updated website—complete with an intensive section detailing the history associated with the site. Hubbard has continued to make updates to the content of the site, though it is overdue an aesthetic update. It

currently contains information about the logistics of the museum—hours, admission prices, etc.—as well as lots of longform written content about Joel Lane, his family, the enslaved community, the house’s architecture, and the plants in the herb garden.¹⁵

Many museums have taken to social media to connect with audiences both near and far. During the pandemic, many museums learned the power of social media sites like Facebook and TikTok for finding new audiences who might never venture to set foot on their site in person. The Joel Lane Museum House staff created a Facebook page in November 2010, under Belle’s guidance. The site currently has 1,200 likes and 1,300 followers who regularly engage with the content posted. The Facebook page also frequently receives Facebook messages from possible Lane descendants seeking to connect with the staff to find out more about their potential ancestors or to confirm their lineage with records from the museum.¹⁶

The Joel Lane Museum House Instagram account’s first post is from November 2014, four years after its Facebook account was made but during the time when Instagram was first booming. The account has 792 followers. In the last several months, updates have been consistent, if not frequent, often sharing bits of nature from the gardens and throwback photos from the museum’s collection. While the staff of the museum could certainly be doing more to build their online presence, they have built a small but engaged community of followers.

¹⁵ Ruse interview, February 3, 2023; Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

¹⁶ Belle Long, Zoom interview, February 3, 2023, transcript in possession of author.

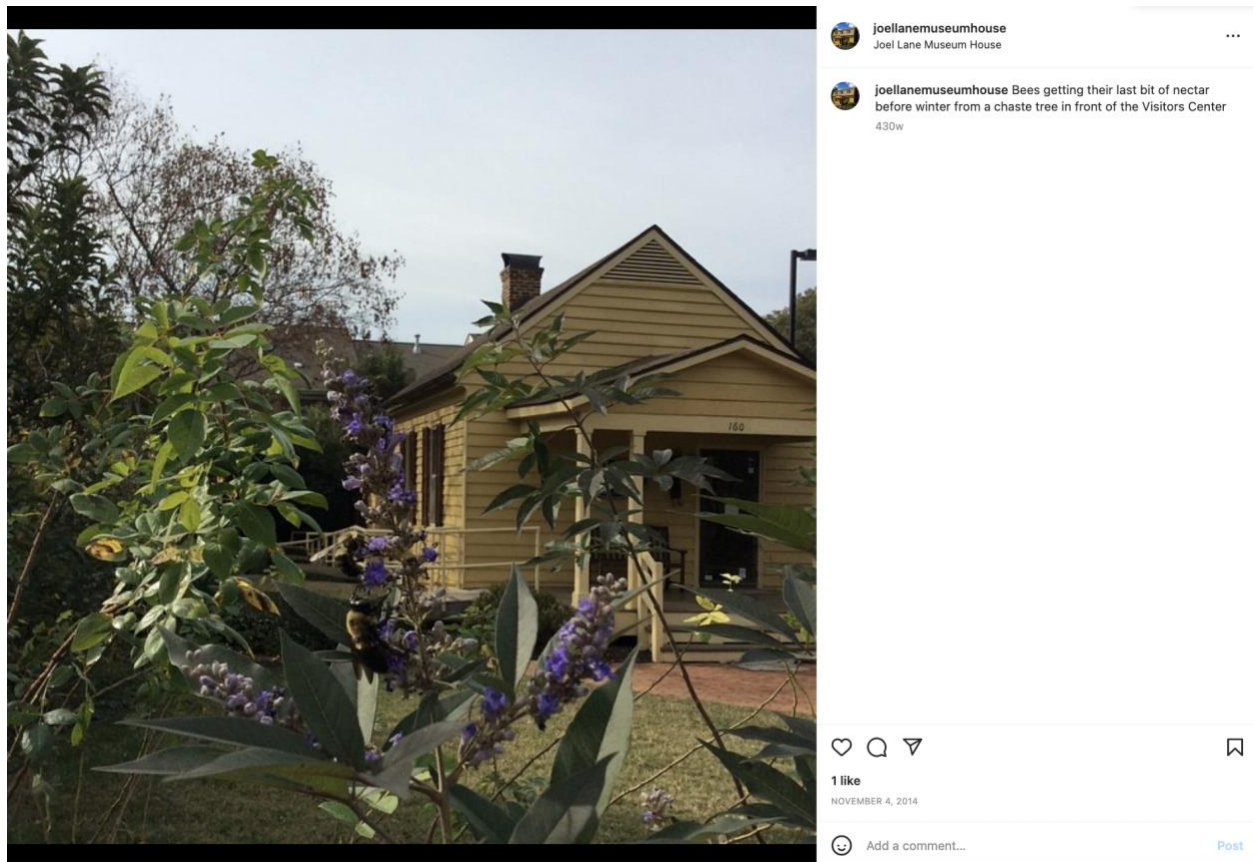


Figure 5: The Joel Lane Museum House's first post on Instagram. Source: @joellanemuseumhouse on Instagram.

If Walls Could Talk

One of the most significant changes to the house in recent years was its repainting in 2020. In the 1970s, a paint study had concluded that the house was originally a pale yellow color that became its signature look over the following decades. In honor of the house's 250th anniversary and because of issues with the current paint, it was decided that a study should be done to attempt to confirm the original color of the house. In 2019, Hubbard hired Dr. Susan Buck, a paint analysis specialist known for her work at Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg. Buck was able to find the original color from 250 years ago, under 25 layers of

paint. The results were surprising: Buck discovered that the original color of the house in 1769 was a rich, deep red color.¹⁷

Repainting the house the new color was a large change for the Colonial Dames, some of whom remembered the original paint analysis. But they eventually were onboard with the idea and the decision was made to leave the Visitors Center the yellow color that the people of Raleigh had come to associate with the house. In March 2020, just before the pandemic shut the house down, painters came to change the house from golden yellow to maroon. In removing the previous coats of paint, there several things were unearthed. Not only traces of the original red paint, but also marks from the pit saw that the enslaved workers who had built the house used and two small lead projectiles embedded in the wood.¹⁸

In September 2022, Buck returned to the house to do a paint analysis of the interior rooms. The results were surprising, showing that the house had been originally painted one somewhat dull color throughout. It raised the further question of if there was originally wallpaper in the downstairs rooms of the house—a distinctive possibility considering the other lengths that Joel Lane went to in order to impress any guests with his wealth. At the time of writing, Hubbard and the Board of Dames had not yet come to a decision on how to proceed with the results of the study.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

¹⁸ Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.

¹⁹ Hubbard interview, May 2022-February 2023.



*Figure 6: The Joel Lane House after having its exterior repainted to a more accurate color.
Source: Photo by Catherine Kimes, used with permission.*

CONCLUSION

As the Joel Lane Museum House approaches its fiftieth anniversary of being open as a museum, it still faces significant challenges, but it also represents an enormous amount of progress. The museum was born in an era in which historic homes were only beginning to emerge from a period of functioning as shrines to attempt to give an accurate view of the lives of those who had lived there. The future of the museum is unclear, especially as legacy groups like the Colonial Dames are losing membership in the twenty-first century.¹

Updating interpretation at a historic house museum is certainly not without its challenges. One of the main issues that arise for staff is the lack of documentation about the lives of those who were not wealthy white men. Much historical interpretation has been based on documentation, like court records and newspapers, that often left women and enslaved people out. Even when they appear, it's often difficult to find their own perspectives and experiences in the sources. At smaller sites like the Joel Lane House, documentation is sparse, even about Joel Lane himself, so including the narratives of other people who lived on his plantation requires innovative thinking and creativity.²

Other challenges facing the house include the lack of time and resources to put towards updating interpretation. Many house museums are small sites with limited funding and a small staff. The Joel Lane Museum House still only has one full-time staff member and two part-time staff members, relying on volunteers for the rest of the work that needs to be done. This means that the few staff members must balance keeping interpretation up to date with best practices

¹ LeRae Umfleet, Zoom interview, February 17, 2023, transcript in possession of the author.

² Mary A. Van Balgooy, "Interpreting Women's Lives at Historic House Museums," in *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth C. Turino and Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 172.

with other, sometimes more pressing tasks like the physical upkeep of the property, running the gift shop, educational events, outreach, and fundraising.

Hopefully, over the next decade, this shift will continue until it is fully the norm for historic sites to focus equally on all people who lived and worked at the historic site, not just the wealthy white men. As more sites commit to a more inclusive interpretation, it will become easier for other sites to follow suit, particularly as they may be able to share information. For example, other house museums in the region of a similar size may be inspired by how the Joel Lane Museum House is interpreting slavery to update their own interpretation.

The staff at the Joel Lane Museum House hopes to continue expanding their interpretation as they have the time and resources to do further research. My work during my internship has aided in this effort by providing updated materials for the website and tour script and educating the staff about Joel Lane's daughters. Dr. Craig Friend at NC State University is currently working on a book about Lunsford Lane that, when published, will provide new information about the enslaved community on Joel Lane's property to incorporate into the website and tour script.

It is vitally important that historic sites and museums are presenting as accurate a picture of history as possible, especially when it can help to correct gaps left in education. Clint Smith discusses a conversation he had with two women who were on a tour of Monticello and were shocked to learn about Jefferson's relationship with slavery. One of the women says that thinking about the humanity of the enslaved people, of their life experiences "wasn't part of the education." Because so much of history education in schools is still focused on wealthy white men, it is up to historic sites to fill the gaps left behind.³

³ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021), 25.

Interpretation at historic house museums will continue to adapt as the field of history evolves. Hopefully, this adaptation will prompt more people to be interested in historic sites because they see experiences that feel relevant to them reflected there. This may help ensure the continuation of the public history field in the future while also helping to fix the inadequacies of the education system.

During Joel Lane's time, his home was said to have been called "the best house in 100 miles." It may no longer meet that standard, but it still stands as a monument to some of the earliest residents of the Raleigh area—both Joel Lane's family and the enslaved families that labored on the land.

APPENDICES

Timeline of the Joel Lane Museum House

1739: Joel Lane was born in Halifax County, North Carolina.

1769: Joel Lane's enslaved workers built a house for him on his plantation.

1770: Joel Lane introduced the bill for the founding of Wake County to the Colonial Assembly in New Bern.

1771: Wake County was officially created.

1792: Joel Lane sold one thousand acres to the state of North Carolina for the founding of its capital city, Raleigh.

March 29, 1795: Joel Lane died. His second wife, Mary, died a few days later. Their ten-year-old son Thomas inherited the house.

1808: Thomas sold the house to his sister Dorothy's husband, Allen Gilchrist.

1813: Allen Gilchrist sold the house to Scottish attorney Peter Browne.

1818: William Boylan purchased the house from Peter Browne. It would remain in the Boylan family for a century.

1890: The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America was founded.

1894: The North Carolina chapter of the Colonial Dames of America was founded.

1919: Josephine Boylan Van Patten sold the house to R. H. Merritt.

1927: The Wake County Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America purchased the Joel Lane House.

November 30, 1927: The Colonial Dames temporarily opened the house to the public for the first time.

Early 1940s: The National Youth Administration used the house for instructing young men on restoration work.

July 1969: The Colonial Dames successfully applied for the house to be added to the National Register of Historic Places.

1969 – 1976: The Colonial Dames restored the house to its appearance during Joel Lane's lifetime.

1974: The bones found in the excavation of the original site of the house were reinterred at City Cemetery.

April 22, 1976: The Joel Lane Museum House officially opened.

April 23, 1978: The formal colonial gardens, designed by Donald Parker, were officially unveiled to the public.

1999: The Colonial Dames hired LeRae Umfleet to be the museum's first professional curator.

2005: Charles Jacobs became Curator.

April 23, 2007: The Visitors Center opened.

2007: Belle Long took on the role of Curator and changed her title to Director.

2017: Current Director Lanie Hubbard took on the role of Director when Long retired.

February 16, 2020: The museum installed a plaque in the herb garden to honor the enslaved individuals who worked on the plantation under the ownership of Joel Lane.

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