

COMMUNITY CONTROVERSY:

Can it be positive?

The Susan B. Anthony Birthplace opened in 2010 as a museum in Adams, MA, amid controversy. Find out what this historic house did to overcome the controversy and the lessons it learned.

Controversy around Susan B. Anthony's birthplace began as soon as I purchased the house in 2006. An AP story, written by a writer with keen googling skills, described me as a "a pro-life feminist" active in Feminists Choosing Life of New York (FCLNY). It headlined in 47 newspapers across the country within 48 hours. The fact that I live in a remarkably similar 1826 Quaker federal home on the National Historic Registry that I personally restored, and that I was a collector of suffrage memorabilia was just a sidebar.

Anthony was born in Adams, Massachusetts, in 1820 in a home constructed by her father, Daniel. Her birthplace was the subject of postcards even before her death in 1906. Anthony's work for women's right to vote led to the Susan B Anthony Amendment, the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution. One hundred years later, her homestead was mine with a high bid at auction of a modest \$164,000.

Previously, there were a number of false starts by the Town of Adams, individuals, and non-profits to preserve the home. Within 4 months of my purchase, the roof of the

1,900-square foot structure caved, signaling the need to restore the property post haste. Search for a local historic architect, an executive director with a Ph.D. in history/women's studies, and a board that included Anthony family descendants commenced the first year. \$1.1 million later, the birthplace was fully restored and opened as a museum in 2010.

The birthplace has 12 exhibits. They are: Quaker life, textiles and samplers, phrenology (the character study of Anthony's skull shape done in her 30s), Susan's birth room, Daniel's store (where he sold to area farmers), and a portrait gallery. The largest space is the Legacy Room. This displays ephemera associated with Anthony's 19th-century activism: Temperance, Abolition, Suffrage, Winning the Vote, and Opposition to Restellism, or opposition to abortion.

Restellism, the 19th-century term from the infamous abortionist Madame Restell, was unanimously condemned by suffragists. Anthony refused to run ads in her newspaper, *The Revolution*, for this "immoral practice." The policy was repeated

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and/or explained in the paper 22 times. Over 100 direct and indirect references in articles, editorials and letters by suffragists in the paper condemned abortion.

[Editor's note: The museum's 2010 opening was met with controversy, as pro-choice bloggers challenged the museum's anti-abortion display and a small group of pro-choice advocates demonstrated at a museum function in Adams, Massachusetts. (www.iberkshires.com/story/33977/Anthony-Museum-Opening-Sparks-Debate-on-Abortion.html)]

My entrée into this little bit of women's history was both a curse and a blessing. I often learned the hard way how to distinguish between historical correctness and political correctness. Here's what I learned:

First, **be transparent** about what might be a controversial plan. Transparency can be achieved by simply stating your mission across the bottom of a press release or as direct as making it part of a grant application. When a few people threatened to block the opening, we provided an advance pre-viewing of the exhibits to town leaders and media. We invited opponents to sit down and discuss the primary sources for the exhibits.

Second, **establish a fiscally separate organization and board** with its own non-profit identity, separate from an agenda-driven organization. In the case of the

birthplace, FCLNY plays a role in board selection and fundraising. However, from the beginning it has had little or no interaction with the museum's management or finances. The birthplace discovered the hard way that simply having this separation on paper is not sufficient to avoid public confusion.

Third, **cherish all communications**. Collect the congratulatory mail and blog posts you receive from the controversy and turn them back around asking for do-

Restellism exhibit was created. Strict unequivocal scholarship is a must.

Fifth, **target specific supporters**, particularly historians and individuals who do not believe in censorship. And don't forget about foundations that are often attracted to the role philanthropy can play in bringing insight and civility to our society. The impact of history on today's unsettled social conflict can be a valuable pitch to potential funders interested in cultural engagement.

Lastly, don't be afraid to **be relevant**. Welcome the controversy and use it to your advantage. Anthony's colleague Matilda Joslyn Gage said, "To judge how much our acts will influence the future, we must look back and see what influence the past has had upon us."

We wonder, has the controversy cost the birthplace needed resources and revenue? Probably. While we'll never know the amount of

resources that didn't come into the birthplace because of our Restellism display, we can gauge how much support has come in because of it. With a small endowment, a constant stream of donations, volunteers and interns, and 4,000 visitors to date, this historical jewel at the foot of Mt. Greylock in Adams, MA, is holding its own.



Left to right: Susan B. Anthony Birthplace Museum; Daniel Anthony's Store; SBA Amendment - Winning the Vote exhibit; Birthing Room.

nations and volunteers. And don't throw away the hate mail. There are truths to be found in every opinion.

Fourth, **ensure objectivity** by using primary resources and a board of historians for exhibit creation. The birthplace has access to one of the largest private collections of Anthony's newspaper, *The Revolution*. It is from this collection that the Opposition to

