

Guild to give up running historic Cooke-Dorn House



By TOM JACKSON tomjackson@sanduskyregister.com, March 4, 2025

SANDUSKY - The Old House Guild of Sandusky has run the historic Cooke-Dorn mansion for 30 years.

But, this week, those from the local preservation group said they've had enough.

Starting this summer, the guild announced that it will no longer provide day-to-day staffing for the local historic attraction at 1415 Columbus Ave. Guild members circled June 30 as the last day members would operate the property. Cooke-Dorn has regular hours for visitors several days a week in July and August and is open by appointment the rest of the year. It also has been a regular stop for the annual Candlelight Tour of Homes that the guild provides most holiday seasons.

Ohio History Connection, a state agency that preserves state history, owns Cooke-Dorn but has delegated running it to the guild. A spokesman for the Ohio History Connection, Neil Thompson, said the state agency only learned about the Old House Guild's decision two weeks ago and has made no decision what it will do with Cooke-Dorn. "The plan is to figure out what to do," said Thompson.

Problems outlined

The guild's board cited several reasons for giving up its role at Cooke-Dorn as outlined in a statement:

- "Maintaining unpaid staff to conduct tours of the home is no longer sustainable."
- "The presentation of the site has not changed, and the relevance of the tours has diminished."
- "The guild does not have the financial resources to transform the home into a museum."
- The guild board "recognized that the energy of the guild should be shifted more toward the original mission to serve the community in important preservation work and support."

Major spending on maintenance is the state's responsibility, and state officials haven't kept up with the property's needs, guild officials said.

How much?

The guild has suggested restoring the first floor to its 19th-century appearance and converting the second floor into exhibits to highlight local history, including the Underground Railroad, the American Crayon Co. and the Mad River and Lake Erie Railroad. After collecting estimates from local contractors, the guild has told state officials that needed repairs and equipment replacements will cost \$300,000. Adding exhibits to make it more of a museum would run another \$100,000, said Tim Berkey, spokesman for the Old House Guild. Giving up responsibility for Cooke-Dorn will let the guild, which has about 150 members, concentrate on its main mission of helping preserve historic buildings in Sandusky, Berkey said.

The group paused its annual Candlelight Tour this past December but plans on bringing back this annual event for 2025. Additionally, this year, it intends to help local homeowners apply to the National Register of Historic Places, work with the city on projects of joint interest and expand its local workshops and events.

History lesson

The Cooke-Dorn House, on the National Register since 1982, was built by prominent Sanduskian Eleutheros Cooke, the city's first lawyer and a member of Congress who contributed to Sandusky in many ways. For example, he drew up the charter for the Mad River and Erie Railroad, the city's first railroad. Originally at West Washington Row and Columbus Avenue, the period mansion was later moved to its current location. Randolph and Estelle Dorn bought it in 1951. Estelle Dorn bequeathed it to the state in 1995.