

Clarion Review ★★★★☆

TRAVEL

Guidebook to Historic Houses and Gardens in New England: 71 Sites from the Hudson Valley East

Willit Mason

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Mason's love of history and the sites of New England is inviting.

Guidebook to Historic Houses and Gardens in New England: 71 Sites from the Hudson Valley East by Willit Mason gives travelers practical and historical knowledge about the birthplace of America.

New England, one of the earliest settled parts of the United States, arguably has some of its deepest history. That history is beautifully preserved in its many breathtaking homes, many well over a century old, crafted of ageless stone, and many surrounded by natural, well-manicured splendor. Mason provides a well-thought-out guide that traverses the region and the decades, showing the deep history beneath the present-day grandeur. The book catalogues the region thoroughly without being overwhelmingly exhaustive.

The book is aptly organized by geography, sometimes by state (such as Rhode Island) sometimes by region (such as the Berkshires), thoroughly covering the six New England states and the bordering Hudson Valley. The table of contents lists each location with its city and state, making it easy to navigate the book itself, but more importantly, to plan a trip to the sites. Each section begins with a simple and easy-to-read map that calls out the sites in that area. Each site entry opens with the needed information to visit: address, contact information, opening times and season, tours available, and cost.

The tone is intellectual and informative but highly readable and easy to visualize. Recounting of history is well paced, concise, and focused—giving an insightful overview of key events and people without overburdening the book's main purpose as a guidebook. Each site's section ends with practical insight that showcases the key reasons to visit and what to expect.

Certainly, in its focus on historic homes, many of which are mansions, the history more heavily features the upper crust of New England society, yet the book is able to eschew elitism, at least to some degree, because the history of the region is, in so many ways, the history of the nation.

Photos are black and white, crisp, and well rendered, and yet, given the stunning nature of the sites, they leave one longing for more: color, full-bleed art, images for different angles. But this photographic choice keeps the book focused on history and leaves it manageable to take on the road—because nothing can replace seeing the sites firsthand.

Mason's love of history and the sites of New England is inviting. The book is well researched and has great attention to detail. Each entry brims with a balance of research and firsthand experience. The book began as a response to Mason's own need for a guidebook, and he ensures that no one else will face the same lack.

Guidebook to Historic Houses and Gardens in New England beautifully lives up to the promise of the title.

MELISSA WUSKE (November 29, 2017)

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