

Museum and Heritage Center Mungo Park House, Asaba

A Proposal

S. Elizabeth Bird, Ph.D. and Fraser Ottanelli, Ph.D.
University of South Florida

Importance of Site



The National Museum Asaba, known as Mungo Park House, is a prefabricated, wooden structure brought to Asaba from Britain, and constructed in or around 1886, the year in which the Royal Niger Company received a charter of incorporation. The company was authorized to administer the Niger delta and all the lands on the banks of the Niger and Benue rivers. From 1886-1900 the building served as the administrative headquarters of the Company, with the commercial headquarters located in Onitsha. According to historian Elizabeth Isichei, “the company's buildings occupied 40 acres and were surrounded by a nine-foot iron railing,” and by 1889, 400 soldiers were stationed there. Of the original buildings, the two-story Mungo Park House, with its impressive verandahs, is the most significant structure remaining, although several other smaller buildings still stand on museum property, and at least one remains on the grounds of the nearby Grand Hotel. The building housed offices and residential quarters for high-ranking officials.

The repressive regime of the company sparked the Ekukumeku resistance movement in the 1890s. This, along with constant battles with other colonial powers, eventually resulted in the transference of the company’s charter to the imperial British government on Dec. 31, 1899. The building served briefly (1900 – 1901) as the territorial seat of the British government, before that was later moved to Calabar, in part because of continuing unrest in the territory.

Over the years, the building served as Water Board offices, a School for the Handicapped, and other purposes. From 1954 – 1976, it was the seat of the Urban District Council, and the NCMM took over the building in 1997. The building had been known as Royal Niger Company House, but the NCMM believes it was renamed at the beginning of the 20th century. Niger explorer Mungo Park never visited Asaba, and died in 1806, but his ventures had revealed the trade potential of the land, and apparently the structure was named in his honor.

Thus the site is of major historical importance. Its association with the earliest colonial incursion, as well as with the organized resistance, is pivotal in the development of Asaba in particular, and the eventual formation of Nigeria. The building itself is unique; it is the only significant structure of the Royal Niger Company era remaining in the country, and is an imposing presence overlooking the banks of the Niger. It was constructed from highly durable, seasoned palm wood, and has distinctive features, such as a wrap-around porch and verandah. In a town that was all-but-destroyed in the Civil War, its survival is remarkable.

The NCMM-owned property includes the main building and two small adjacent buildings dating from the original era, as well as several small modern structures comprising a craft village and museum kitchen complex, donated by the Asagba of Asaba, Professor Joseph Chike Edozien.

Urgency of the Project:

The building has withstood heavy use, war, nearby redevelopments, and other threats over the last 128 years, and has remained relatively intact. However, it is now in an alarming state of disrepair. A recent newspaper article (*Sunday Trust*, 25 March 2012), noted that it is “teetering on the brink.” The reporter noted that “the house, erected with stout and cooked wooden palm carefully arranged vertically and horizontally, is falling apart. Indeed, some parts, especially the staircase, where nuts and bolts used to join the wooden palm together, is loosing and falling off, a situation that seriously endangers the life of users.” Another article (*Nigerian Best Forum*, March 27, 2012) describes the Mungo Park House as “a national monument of political, historical and cultural significance [that] bears a sordid tale of neglect.” An opinion piece in *This Day* (Sept. 29, 2012), which makes a detailed and cogent case for the need to develop heritage tourism in Nigeria, singles out Mungo Park House as a nationally significant monument that is “in a state of deterioration.” This recent attention points to the urgency of the issue, as the country wakes up to the probability that this unique edifice will soon be lost.



The problems with the building range from the cosmetic (paint that is peeling completely disappeared), to the structural (staircases and verandahs with rotted beams and slats). Remodeling over the years has closed off windows and doors. Staff reported at a recent visit that they sometimes fear for their lives, especially when working in the upper story. If significant repairs are not made very soon, the building will likely need to be condemned. Thus the central need is to renovate the building,

restoring it as far as possible to its original state, with careful, historically-accurate methods and materials. The basic structure is intact, but the need for skillful reconstruction is urgent.

The Potential of Heritage Tourism

Around the world, nations are discovering the value of cultural heritage as a source of pride and economic development. Africa is no exception: Ghana, for example, has developed many heritage sites and museums that have boosted national prestige and brought visitors and cash into the economy. Nigeria lags behind, but this proposal provides an opportunity to create a model museum and resource center. The Mungo Park House is an ideal site for such a project – historic in its own right, strategically located on the main Nnebisi Road, adjacent to the Grand Hotel, and already staffed.

Thus we propose a collaborative partnership that will transform a monument of colonialism into a symbol of Asaba, Delta State, and Nigerian pride. The first step is the renovation, as discussed above. The next step is the development of quality exhibits that will transform the Mungo Park Museum into a museum and resource center not only for Asaba but also for the state, region, and nation. It should tell the story of regional culture as it flourished for centuries before the arrival of the colonisers; then the story of oppression, resistance, and independence after the colonial era; the traumatic experience of the Civil War, and finally the post-war period and the development of modern Delta State.

To create the exhibits for the museum, we offer to work in partnership with the Curator and staff at the Museum, as well as with academic experts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and elsewhere. We would hope to incorporate artifacts that have apparently been in storage in Asaba for some time. History and culture could be presented through a combination of narrative panels, incorporating text and images (historical photos, maps, art), and displays of artifacts, with explanatory information. The museum could become much more than a historical repository; following best practices in heritage management, it would be a resource center for the entire community, offering education and training programs to assist the people of Asaba and Delta State with important community development goals.

A site like Mungo Park House could lead the way in establishing heritage tourism as a growth area in the country. The site is of historic value not only to Asaba and Delta State but also to the history of transatlantic relations over many years. The Royal Niger Company developed in the Asaba region as a response to the British abolition of the slave trade, developing the international trade in palm oil that was centered on the Niger. The building stands as an appropriate symbol of the region's past marked by rich culture and complicated history. This history is relatively overlooked; a properly-renovated Mungo Park House could be a catalyst to develop international awareness of this complex story.