



Mansion Docent Guidelines

May 2026

These guidelines and resources are provided to help ensure the best possible experience for docents *and* visitors on guided tours.

Questions & Support

For questions regarding the volunteer program or docent service, please contact us at volunteers@hillwoodmuseum.org or 202.686.8528.

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Overview

Docent Responsibilities

Like Hillwood, docents are committed to providing the best possible visitor experience. Mansion docents are essential members of the volunteer team and play a key role in welcoming, engaging, and supporting visitors.

As a mansion docent, you will:

- Lead accurate and compelling tours of the mansion
- Support evening events and public programs by serving on-station in the mansion or exhibition by responding to visitor questions
- Promote a positive, enjoyable experience by maintaining a courteous, professional demeanor and proactively assisting visitors when needed.

Transition to Active Docent Status

Docents-in-training become active docents after successfully completing their qualifying tour.

Once qualified, you will receive:

- **Volgistics Access:** Access to Volgistics, Hillwood's volunteer database and scheduling system, along with login details and instructions for updating your profile and signing up for docent shifts.
- **Volunteer Identification:** A Hillwood nametag, photo ID badge, and lanyard. These must be worn at all times while on duty to help visitors easily identify you as a source of information and assistance.
- **Building Access Card:** An access card providing entry to the Butler's House (including the volunteer lounge) through both front and back entrances, as well as access to the mansion's side entrance.

Lost Items: Lost nametags, ID badges, lanyards, or access cards must be reported immediately to the Hillwood volunteer management team. Replacements will be ordered and provided in a timely manner.

Parking

All volunteers should enter Hillwood through the upper gate. Please observe the 15-mph speed limit throughout the estate and remain alert to both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Volunteers may park in one of the following designated areas: back railing behind the C.W. Post Center or the lower gate drive.

For safety and operational reasons, do not move any cones placed in parking areas. Upon arrival, Security staff may direct you to an alternate parking location based on operational needs.

Please refer to the [volunteer parking map and instructions](#) on the volunteer website.

Volunteer Lounge

The volunteer lounge, located in the Butler's House near the cutting garden, serves as a central hub for volunteers to connect, recharge during breaks, and access key resources. It offers a range of amenities, including comfortable lounge seating, a large conference table, a fully equipped kitchen, secure storage, and an on-site volunteer reference library, all designed to support volunteers throughout their shifts.

Storage for Personal Belongings

- Secure 18" lockers with digital keypads are available for storing personal items. A coat closet and umbrella holder are also provided.

- When working in the mansion, volunteers may use the coat closet adjacent to the Security control room when entering through the side entrance.
- Volunteers may carry a cell phone for emergencies; however, personal use (calls or texting) during shifts is discouraged.

Daily Volunteer Schedule & Updates

To support daily operations, a daily volunteer schedule, briefing notes, and groups report is prepared and posted each day the museum is open. These materials are available in the volunteer lounge and at the mansion coat check, located just off the entry hall.

Daily Volunteer Schedule	Volunteer Briefing Notes	Groups Report
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Number of pre-registered visitors for day – Tour ticket availability for mansion and garden tours – Groups and/or members pre-booked for a docent-led tour – Volunteers scheduled for the day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Programs and events scheduled for the week – Updates and reminders regarding the volunteer and visitor experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Group name and size – Group itinerary (guided or self-guided, café reservations, etc.) – Special notes (accessibility needs, etc.) <p><i>If no groups are scheduled, the group report will not be printed.</i></p>

Tour Attendance Tracking

A tour attendance form is also provided in the volunteer lounge for docents to record the number of visitors on their tours. This information helps Hillwood track visitation trends and informs future program planning.

Tour Structure

Mansion tours are designed as highlight experiences that provide a general overview of Hillwood, its founder, and the collection. These tours focus on overarching themes and carefully distilled information rather than minutiae.

Docents use established interpretive frameworks and key messages to shape both the structure and content of their tours. While these frameworks provide consistency, docents are encouraged to bring their own voice and perspective to create an engaging experience.

A docent-led tour is just one point of entry into a quality Hillwood visit. Depending on a visitor's interests, learning style, or time constraints, other options, such as a self-guided experience or the mobile audio tour, may be preferred. As a result, docents should expect to share spaces with independent visitors. These individuals may already be in a room when your group arrives or may briefly listen in before continuing their visit.

Private & Custom Tours

Private and custom tours are scheduled outside of standard public tour times and are offered at a premium rate.

- **Private tours** are groups paying an additional cost for a private tour booked outside of the regularly scheduled tours offered for groups and the public. Private tours follow the same framework and tour route as the public mansion tours.
- **Custom tours** are groups paying an additional cost for a private tour that is tailored to specific interests to a group and may include modified routes or themes. Docents assigned to custom tours receive information in advance about the group's requests. These tours are relatively infrequent.

If visitors attempt to join a private or custom tour, kindly explain that the tour is private and direct them to alternative resources such as brochures, the mobile audio tour, or assistance from the visitor center.

Unscheduled/Unauthorized Tours vs. Informal Visits

Only trained Hillwood docents and staff are permitted to lead guided tours of the mansion and gardens. Outside tour guides or operators are not allowed to lead groups on Hillwood property. If you encounter an unauthorized tour, please notify Security, volunteer management staff, or visitor services staff in the visitor center when convenient.

An unscheduled or unauthorized tour is a formal experience without approval, where someone attempts to lead a group through the mansion without permission. This differs from an informal visit, where guests explore independently or quietly discuss the rooms among themselves.

On-station for Evening Events & Public Programs

On-station duties provide docents with the opportunity to engage visitors outside of a formal tour setting. Rather than leading a structured experience, docents serve as approachable, knowledgeable resources throughout the mansion and/or exhibition, enhancing the visitor experience through conversation, guidance, and by supporting visitors as they explore at their own pace.

On-station coverage is typically assigned during evening events and public programs, as well as on high-volume attendance days (such as Mother's Day), when additional visitor support is especially important.

Tour Timing & Coordination

Mansion tours are designed to last 60 minutes, balancing visitor comfort with the goal of delivering a meaningful and engaging educational experience.

Mansion tours include 10 rooms, following a pre-determined route with established timing for each space. These guidelines are designed to support a smooth flow throughout the mansion and ensure all visitors have access to the spaces.

This timeframe includes:

- Introduction and conclusion of the tour
- Movement between rooms
- Time spent in each room, including visitor engagement and questions

Multiple tours take place at the same time with up to five docents leading groups concurrently. Awareness of other groups and adherence to timing expectations are essential to maintaining a positive experience for all visitors.

Docents should feel comfortable reminding visitors that the tour is an introduction and that additional opportunities exist to explore more deeply. Visitors can be directed to the visitor center or Hillwood's website for more information about the following offerings:

- Mobile audio tour
- Docent-led garden tours (offered April-June and September-November)
- Special exhibitions and greenhouse
- Public programs and membership opportunities

Maintaining the Tour Timeframe

Adhering to the 60-minute timeframe is essential. Tours that run significantly over or under time can unintentionally disrupt other docents and visitors, often resulting in multiple groups occupying the same room at once.

If tour overlap occurs, respond with grace and composure, both in the moment and afterward:

- **In the moment:** Make eye contact with the other docent and offer a polite, nonverbal cue (such as a nod or thumbs up) to signal awareness. This helps coordinate who will move to the next space. Depending on room capacity, you may choose to enter the space or gather your group nearby until it becomes available.
- **After the tour:** Follow up with the docent in a collegial and constructive way. You might begin by saying, *"Thank you for adjusting in the (room name). It seemed like our timing overlapped."* From there, work together to identify simple strategies that could help prevent similar situations in the future.
- **Ongoing concerns:** If overlaps continue to be an issue, inform volunteer management staff so they can provide additional support and guidance.

Group Size & Audience

Docents typically lead groups of 1–10 visitors, with a maximum of 10 visitors per docent. On rare occasions, groups may reach up to 12.

Groups of 10 or more, as well as Hillwood members, may reserve tours in advance. Remaining tickets are distributed on a first-come, first-served basis at the visitor center tour desk.

Serving a Diversity Audience

Docents should expect to engage a diverse audience. Visitors may differ in age and background, prior knowledge or familiarity with Hillwood, interests and motivations, and physical ability and preferred learning style. Flexibility and inclusivity are key to an excellent visitor experience. Docents are expected to adapt their approach to meet the needs of each group and create an inclusive, engaging experience.

Managing Additional Visitors ("Hangers-On")

Visitors, sometimes referred to as "hangers-on," may occasionally join a tour after it has begun.

- **For public tours:** docents should remain flexible and welcoming when possible, provided the number of additional guests remains small or if the additional visitors only listen briefly in one room. Most visitors will self-select to continue independently after a short time. If needed, a friendly announcement can help set expectations:

"Our tour is currently in progress, and you're welcome to listen in for this room. However, due to group size limits, we aren't able to accommodate additional guests throughout the full tour. Our staff can help you explore other options, including the mobile audio tour."

- **For private or custom tours:** additional visitors should be politely informed that the tour is not open to the public and directed to other resources.

Shift Expectations & Scheduling

Mansion tours are offered at 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., Tuesday-Sunday and at 3:30 p.m., Friday-Sunday. Each tour is one hour in length.

Docents are expected to serve a minimum of two shifts per month, totaling approximately 100 service hours annually. A standard docent shift is typically four hours in length, usually from 11 a.m.-3 p.m., during which docents usually lead two mansion tours. This structure allows for both active engagement and time to rest between tours.

11 a.m.-3 p.m. Shift	Tuesday-Sunday
11 a.m.	Arrival: Report to the volunteer lounge and sign-in
11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.	Lead mansion tour
12:30-1:30 p.m.	Break: Allows time for lunch
1:30-2:30 p.m.	Lead mansion tour
3 p.m.	Departure

Additional opportunities are available for those who wish to serve more, including shorter shifts (such as 3-5 p.m. for 3:30 p.m. mansion tour, Friday-Sunday), private tours, and on-station support at events and programs.

Hillwood is open Tuesday–Sunday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. The estate is closed on Mondays, most national holidays, and for several weeks in January.

Scheduling Your Shifts

Hillwood uses Volgistics for volunteer scheduling. Shifts open on the 6th of each month for the following month, and volunteers sign up based on their availability. Most volunteers are on a flexible (“floating”) schedule, allowing you to choose shifts that best fit your calendar. Because shift availability can vary, flexibility is encouraged.

Note: A small number of long-standing volunteers remain on a fixed schedule. While this model was retired over a decade ago, it continues to be honored for those originally assigned to it.

Recording Volunteer Hours

Service hours are tracked to accurately document volunteer contributions and evaluate program impact. Volunteers record their hours by signing in and out for each shift using the QR code or iPad in the volunteer lounge, or by logging hours remotely through the “Service” page in Volgistics.

For a complete guide on scheduling procedures, recording service hours, and exploring additional Volgistics features, please refer to the [Volgistics User Guide](#).

Attendance for training and continuing education sessions (in-person or virtual) is entered into Volgistics by staff.

Low Attendance Scenarios

If there are not enough visitors for all the docents scheduled:

- **Divide into small groups:** Docents should coordinate discreetly to determine who will lead the tour. When possible, visitors should be evenly divided into small groups. This provides a more exclusive experience for the visitors and helps docents remain proficient with tour content and skills.
- **Remain available for late arrivals:** The docent not leading should remain in the entry hall for 5–10 minutes to accommodate any late arrivals.
- **Self-study or early departure:** If no visitors arrive, docents may use the time for self-study or exploring the estate (the mobile audio tour is a useful refresher). If you have no additional tours scheduled, you may sign out early.

Mansion Tour Routes

Docents follow one of five designated tour routes (see below for details). Each route includes the same ten rooms but presented in a different order. A maximum of five tours operate at the same time, carefully choreographed to ensure smooth movement through the mansion and to allow groups to pass each other with ease.

- **Timing Structure:** Each room is assigned a specific time allotment, and the full tour is designed to last 60 minutes. This timing includes transitions between rooms, as well as the introduction at the beginning and the conclusion at the end of the tour.
- **Daily Assignments:** Each shift, docents are randomly assigned a tour route, which is indicated on the daily schedule. "Cheat Cards" for each route are available in the volunteer lounge for quick reference and use during a tour.
- **Visitor Experience Overview:** Throughout the tour, docents also help visitors understand the full range of experiences available at Hillwood, including self-guided spaces such as the Second Floor Gallery and staff dining room, exhibitions in the dacha and Adirondack building, the gardens, the museum shop, and the Merriweather Café.

Tour A	Min.	Tour B	Min.	Tour C	Min.
Entry Hall	5	French Drawing	6	Icon Room	10
Pavilion	6	Russian Porcelain	6	Downstairs Library	2
French Drawing	6	Icon Room	10	Dining Room	6
Russian Porcelain	6	Downstairs Library	2	Kitchen/Pantry	5
Icon Room	10	Dining Room	6	French Porcelain	6
Downstairs Library	2	Kitchen/Pantry	5	MMP Bedroom Suite	5
Dining Room	6	French Porcelain	6	Entry Hall	5
Kitchen/Pantry	5	MMP Bedroom Suite	5	Pavilion	6
French Porcelain	6	Entry Hall	5	French Drawing	6
MMP Bedroom Suite	5	Pavilion	6	Russian Porcelain	6
Total	57	Total	57	Total	57

Tour D	Min.	Tour E	Min.
Dining Room	6	Kitchen/Pantry	5
Kitchen/Pantry	5	French Porcelain	6
French Porcelain	6	MMP Bedroom Suite	5
MMP Bedroom Suite	5	Entry Hall	5
Entry Hall	5	Pavilion	6
Pavilion	6	French Drawing	6
French Drawing	6	Russian Porcelain	6
Russian Porcelain	6	Icon Room	10
Icon Room	10	Downstairs Library	2
Downstairs Library	2	Dining Room	6
Total	57	Total	57

Mansion Tour Procedures

Once you have signed in through Volgistics, review the daily volunteer schedule for your assignment and any updates related to the day's activities. When leading a mansion tour, please follow the guidelines below:

1. **Greet visitors:** Arrive in the mansion entry hall 15 minutes prior to the tour (i.e.: 11:15 a.m., 1:15 p.m., and 3:15 p.m.) to greet and build rapport with guests.
3. **Collect tour tickets:** Support visitor services volunteers (VSVs) with collecting tour tickets and greeting guests in the entry hall.
4. **Coordinate tour organization:** The docent leader of the day will provide the overall welcome and divide visitors into groups. Before beginning your tour, confirm you have the correct number of guests. (See "Docent Leader of the Day" section below for more details.)
5. **Deliver your tour:** Lead an engaging, visitor-centered tour using the established framework, ensuring the experience remains within the 60-minute timeframe.
6. **Record tour attendance:** After your tour concludes, record your total tour attendance on the form located in the volunteer lounge.

Docent Leader of the Day

Each day, one docent is designated as the "Docent Leader of the Day." The docent assigned to the "A" tour serves in this role.

1. Use the phone in the volunteer lounge to contact visitor services at the front desk (ext. 3929) to confirm the number of visitors signed up for the tour.
2. Ensure the tour begins at the scheduled start time (not early or late). The "A" tour should begin last to allow for late arrivals. Provide additional support as needed, including accommodating latecomers and assisting visitors with special needs.
3. Welcome the tour visitors, using this script:

"Good morning/afternoon. My name is _____ and on behalf of the museum and my fellow docents, welcome to Hillwood!"

Before we begin an hour-long highlights tour of the mansion, we will divide you into X smaller groups, each with XX number of people per group. Each group will see the same rooms, just in a different order. May I have XX number of people go with (insert docent's name), (and so on...)

We recommend following the order below when dividing and starting the tours:

1. Tour C (Icon Room)
2. Tour D (Dining Room)
3. Tour E (Kitchen/Pantry)
4. Tour B (French Drawing Room)
5. Tour A (Entry Hall)

On-station Procedures

Once you have signed in through Volgistics, review the daily volunteer schedule for your assignment and any updates related to the day's activities. When on-station, please follow the guidelines below:

1. **Circulate and engage with visitors:** Circulate regularly through the mansion and/or exhibition every 10–15 minutes, unless actively assisting a visitor. Engage visitors proactively by welcoming guests, answering questions, and sharing insights about Hillwood, the collection, and Marjorie Merriweather Post. When responding to visitor questions, feel free to avail yourself of the informational resources available in the mansion coat check, which include the audio tour scripts, mansion resource binder, garden docent resource binder, and Hillwood publications.
2. **Communicate mansion guides:** Monitor the collection and kindly remind visitors to follow the mansion guidelines, such as no flash photography, no leaning or touching (including walls, doorjambs, and columns), no eating or drinking, etc. Suggested language:

“Please experience the art with your eyes and imagination. Avoid touching any part of the collection or leaning on the walls, doorways, or columns, as many of these pieces are fragile.”

“Feel free to use your camera, but please photograph without a flash. For the comfort of others, we ask that you refrain from taking photos while walking, so the flow of visitors remains smooth.”

For more information on what is permitted in the mansion, refer to the [bag check policy](#).

3. **Monitor visitor flow and provide assistance as needed:** If a room becomes overcrowded, encourage visitors to begin their visit in another area.

Hillwood Accessibility

Everyone is welcome at Hillwood. We are committed to ensuring our facilities, services, exhibitions, and programs are accessible to all audiences and comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. For a complete list of accessibility offerings, please visit the [Accessibility page](#) on Hillwood's website. Below are highlights of accessibility services available to visitors:

Braille & Large Print Resources

Braille and large print resources are available for visitors in the visitor center. Transcripts are also available for each track of the audio tours via the mobile app.

Wheelchairs

Manual wheelchairs are available to borrow on a first-come, first-serve basis in the visitor center. Direct visitors to speak to a visitor services staff member to obtain a wheelchair.

- Areas of the mansion that are not accessible are: the pavilion, Marjorie Post's bedroom suite, and the Second Floor Gallery: Understanding Post's Legacy.
- Note wheelchairs are not easily accommodated in the greenhouse and French parterre.

Elevator

Elevators are available in the visitor center and mansion. The Collections & Research Center is accessible from the elevators at the parking deck (by appointment only).

Visitor Seating

Clear chairs are available for visitors to sit on in most of the rooms throughout the mansion; they do not have ropes across them. While volunteers are also welcome to utilize the chairs when needed, please continue to move/rove the floors when on-station.

Images of Inaccessible Spaces

The mansion coat room houses an iPad with photos of the pavilion, Marjorie Post's bedroom suite, the Second Floor Gallery, and the current special exhibition that volunteers can share with visitors. Photo albums with images of the rooms are also available in the **lower cabinet** in the Russian porcelain room and just outside the bedroom suite. These are the **only** two cabinets volunteers are permitted to open.



Photo album: Pavilion
Location: Russian porcelain room cabinet, to the right of the French drawing room



Photo album: Marjorie Post's Bedroom Suite
Location: Cabinet just outside of Post's bedroom, to the right of the bedroom doorway

Volunteer Communication & Support

Volunteer Support & Collaboration

The volunteer management team is available to support you with any questions or concerns about your experience at Hillwood. With a large and growing community of more than 350 volunteers, we bring together individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Hillwood's volunteer culture is rooted in goodwill, collaboration, and a shared commitment to supporting one another. By fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect, we can work together effectively toward our shared goals.

Addressing Concerns & Resolving Conflicts

If you experience a challenge or conflict with another volunteer, approach the situation with professionalism and care. Take time to understand the other person's perspective and communicate your concerns respectfully. In many cases, a thoughtful conversation can resolve the issue and help maintain a positive working relationship.

If the issue continues or cannot be resolved, please contact the volunteer management team for guidance. We will work with you to determine appropriate next steps and help ensure that all volunteers feel supported, welcome, and valued. Hillwood is committed to maintaining a safe and respectful environment for everyone, free from harassment, discrimination, and violence, whether intentional or unintentional. For more information, please refer to pages 9–11 of the Volunteer Handbook.

Volunteer Feedback

We value your insights, observations, and questions from your volunteer shifts. Your feedback is essential in helping us strengthen our programs and enhance the overall volunteer experience.

You can share your feedback by email at volunteers@hillwoodmuseum.org or by phone at 202.686.8528. The volunteer management team monitors both channels seven days a week, from 9 a.m.-5 p.m., and strives to respond promptly to all messages. Voicemails are automatically routed to the volunteer inbox, allowing the team to remain responsive and connected throughout the day.