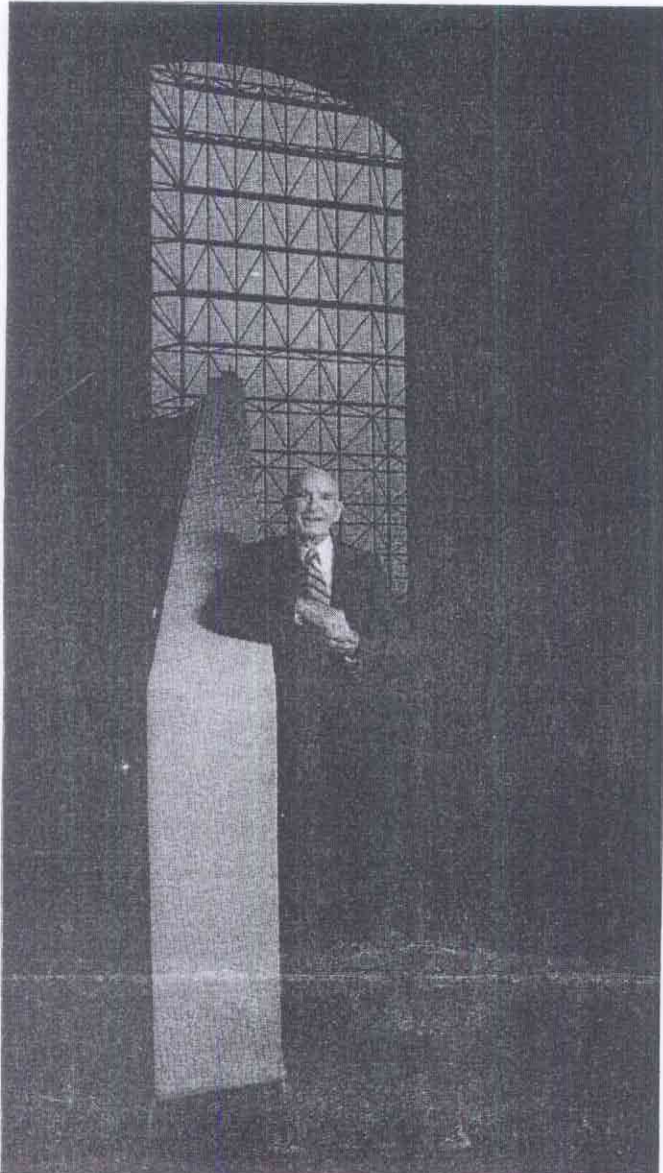


VIEW

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GARY GUISINGER / For The Times

Dave Powers, JFK's personal assistant and now curator of the shrine-like John F. Kennedy Museum and Library in Boston. "I'm not grieving," he says. "But I live part of it every day."

Keeper of the Legend

JFK's Closest Aide and Confidant Aims to Uphold Stellar Image of the President as Scandals, Critics Work to Tarnish It

By JOSH GETLIN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

BOSTON—Like a widower who can't let go, Dave Powers makes sure a visitor sees the photos on his office walls. Pictures of him with Jack Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy and the children. Snapshots of a legacy that lives on.

"You've gotta see this one," he says, pointing to a color photo of Caroline Kennedy at her 1986 wedding, standing next to Powers and her new husband, with the inscription: "In between my two favorite men."

There's a picture of Powers playing with an infant John F. Kennedy Jr. at a Christmas party in 1963 and a message from Jackie: "For Dave Powers, who gave the President so many of his happiest hours—and who will now do the same for his son."

Padding across his office at the John F. Kennedy Museum and Library, the balding man with a million memories stops to straighten a JFK portrait on the wall. "I'm not grieving," he says. "But I live part of it every day."

It's been almost 28 years since John F. Kennedy was cut down by a bullet in Dallas, yet Powers has not forgotten the President who was his best friend and constant companion. Once upon a time, he was the aide who woke Kennedy up in the morning, brought him coffee, straightened his tie and told him jokes. White House colleagues called him "John's other wife." Others knew him as Kennedy's Sancho Panzo, or the court jester of Camelot.

Today, as curator of the Kennedy museum, Powers has become the Keeper of the Flame—the proud and unapologetic defender of a family whose place in history is still being debated. He



John F. Kennedy Library

President Kennedy with Powers, center, and aide Kenneth O'Donnell in 1962 photo in Nassau, Bahamas.

walks among ghosts in a building echoing with the life and times of John F. Kennedy, hoping that others will remember. But it's not an easy job.

When supermarket tabloids and prime-time pundits tell tales of Kennedy-family misconduct, Powers is the man many historians and journalists stop to see before plowing through the archives in an eight-story building here.

When they charge that the family myth has lost its magic, either through Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's latest *mea culpa* or the Palm Beach rape case of William Kennedy Smith, Powers tries to scatter the naysayers.

If they challenge long-held assumptions, such as JFK's heroism aboard PT 109 or whether he actually wrote his prize-winning book, "Profiles in Courage," Powers, 79, is there to hold high the flag, right or wrong.

"I recently watched one television show," he says, "and a writer was saying, 'Boy, I think I've got

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POWERS

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a bestseller here'. . . . He was telling this terrible, terrible story [about JFK], and he could smell the blood.

"Then the host asks, 'How many here would vote for President Kennedy tomorrow?' And the crowd cheered. The stories are so bad, people can't believe them. People still remember Jack Kennedy."

Powers sounds defensive, however, and the museum over which he presides has the similar feeling of a legend under siege. Built on a wind-swept Boston promontory, the complex is a stunning monument to the martyred President. Few are unmoved by its elegiac portrayal of John Kennedy's rise to power.

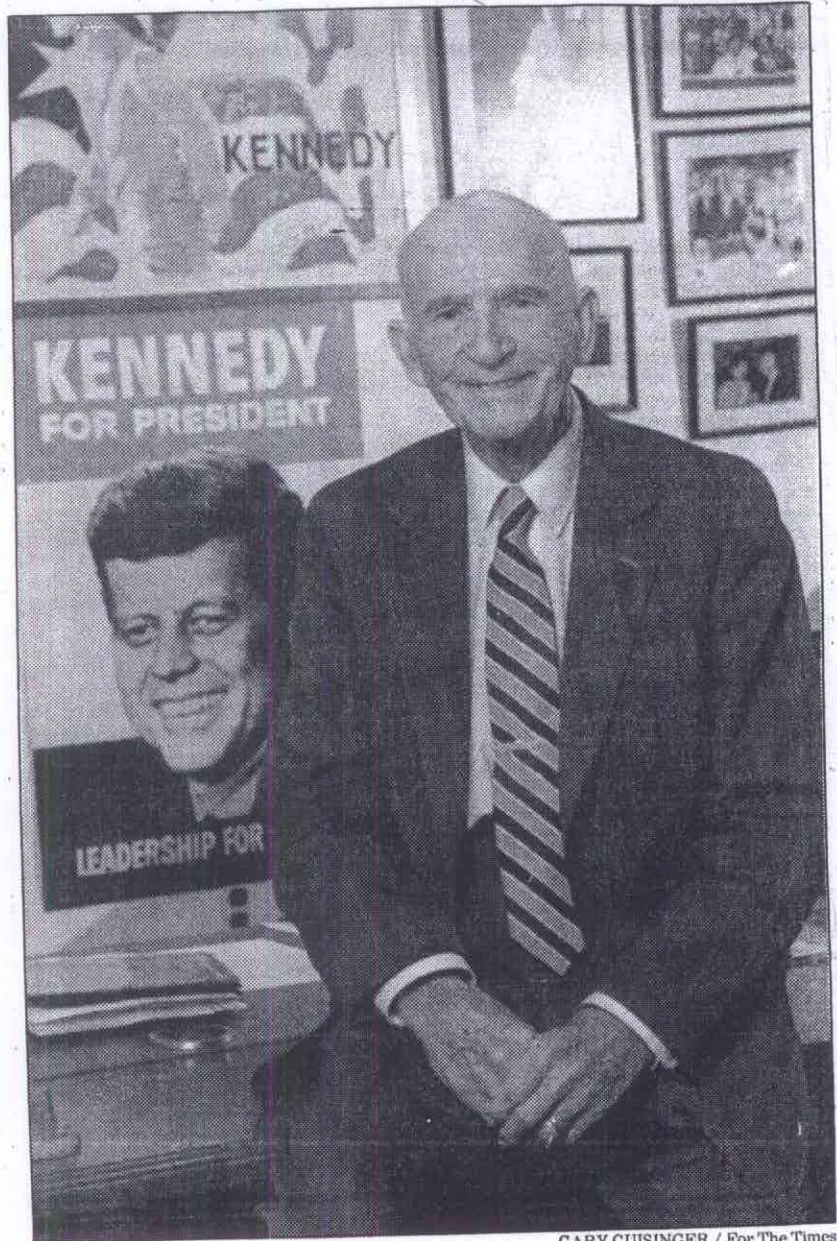
But it is also a house of avoidance and denial, a place where visitors search in vain for any reference to the dark side of the Kennedy presidency. The museum bookshop is crammed with glowing accounts of the New Frontier, but holds few of the revisionist works by historians and mass-market authors that have cast an increasingly critical light on the Administration.

"They're bounty hunters, these writers," Powers says angrily. "I've always said there are only three reasons to write such books: money, money and more money. It takes no courage to make up a story about a dead man."

At times, however, Powers himself has been caught up in the fray.

When Judith Campbell Exner claimed in 1975 that she had simultaneously been Kennedy's White House mistress and the girlfriend of a Chicago mobster, she said Powers had arranged meetings between her and the President. On one occasion, when she had a fight with Kennedy, Exner said, the trusted aide tried to calm her down by taking her on an impromptu White House tour.

A dapper, wiry man whose knowledge of Kennedy history and memorabilia is unsurpassed, Powers has denied knowing Exner and



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Powers concedes that changes are coming to the Kennedy library, including a greater emphasis on the President's 1963 death.

has refused to dwell on the subject. "The only Campbell I know," he once said, "is chunky vegetable soup."

It's a role Powers has played with relish, ever since Jack Kennedy knocked on his door in 1946 and asked for his support in a Boston congressional race. He was at Kennedy's side during his entire political career, and was riding in the car directly behind him in the Dallas motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963.

Minutes later, after the President's limousine raced to Parkland Hospital, Powers helped remove the body from the car and gently put it on a stretcher. He flew back to Washington that afternoon on Air Force One, sitting in the rear of the plane with Jackie Kennedy, next to the casket.

Always, he has been there to serve. It was easy work in the aftermath of the assassination, when the nation couldn't get enough of Kennedy nostalgia. The 1968 murder of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, the President's brother, heightened interest in the family even more. Ever since the library and museum opened in 1979, Powers has been guiding a complex that is more akin to a shrine.

Like the museum, he offers his own, highly personal version of Kennedy family history. Scholars may quarrel with its accuracy, and many doubt the objectivity of his 1970 book, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye." But Powers' story is, if nothing else, hugely entertaining.

As he tells it for the umpteenth time, the lines on his forehead deepen and grow. He leans back in his chair, clears his throat and begins speaking in the same Boston accent that Jack Kennedy used long ago. Suddenly, Powers starts jabbing the air with his hand, just as Kennedy did, and he unconsciously fingers the buttons of his suit coat. The transformation is nearly complete.

"It was the winta-h-h of 1946, a very cold winta-h-h," he begins. Powers, a World War II veteran, was a well-known figure in Charlestown, an Irish district of Boston. One night a knock came at his tenement door, and a thin, good-looking young man appeared, saying he was running for Congress. He said his name was Jack Kennedy, and he asked for support. But the answer was no.

Powers changed his mind, how-

ever, when he saw the young man speak the next day before a group of "Gold Star" mothers who had lost sons in the war. Kennedy wowed the crowd, and he also won over a skeptic from Charlestown.

Born in 1912, Powers was the child of immigrant parents and never went to college. He sold newspapers on the waterfront, ushered five Masses every Sunday at a local church, played on the church baseball team and says he knew "practically everybody" in the neighborhood. He had developed a taste for blue-collar politics, handing out flyers for local officials. But Jack Kennedy—rich, reserved and born to a powerful Hyannis Port family—captured his imagination.

In the congressional race, Powers became a district leader and initiated Jack into the hurly-burly of Boston campaigning. At one

rally, he persuaded him to scrap a highbrow speech about legislation and simply tell folks that his parents were originally from the district. It worked like a charm.

In later years, Powers traveled thousands of miles with Kennedy, through one campaign after another. After his boss was elected President in 1960, the man from Charlestown became his personal assistant. He served as a greeter at White House functions and, more important, as a full-time friend.

Each day, when Kennedy went swimming in the White House pool, Powers was there with him, doing the breast stroke and chatting up the latest gossip. He remembers that the President was upbeat on the eve of his trip to Dallas, believing he would easily win reelection in 1964. But then it

all ended.

"I heard the first shot, positively above and behind me," says Powers, who was riding behind Kennedy's car. "I'm looking at the President like I always did, and I saw him bring his hand in and kind of fall toward Jackie."

"I said, 'Our President's been shot!' and now I see that terrible thing that hit the President on the head, and you never talk about it," he says, his voice tightening. "And now the car begins to accelerate."

At Parkland Hospital, Powers rushed up to the limousine. "The President's eyes were opened and there seemed to be some movement. I said, 'My God, Mr. President, what happened?' And Jackie said, 'He's dead.'"

Hours later, on the flight back to Washington, Powers ordered a stiff

drink and tried to collect his thoughts. He remembers that Jackie turned to him and asked: "Dave, you've been with him so long. What will you do now?"

The answer was simple. Powers had given the best years of his life to the Kennedy family, and he wasn't about to stop. He helped organize the museum, and to this day lives quietly in a Boston suburb with his wife, Jo, watching over a library and a legend.

The complex, designed by I. M. Pei, tells the story of a young President, his brother Robert and an Irish family that played a key role in Boston political history. It's a rich, evocative trip back into time. But for all its meticulous detail, the experience seems jarringly incomplete.

Today, largely at the Kennedy family's insistence, visitors can spend hours in the complex and see no materials pertaining to the 1963 assassination. They watch a film about Robert F. Kennedy without learning how or why he was murdered by Sirhan Sirhan at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

There are no references to the conspiracy theories surrounding each assassination. There are no indications that some historians have slammed the Kennedy Administration's handling of civil rights, the Cuban missile crisis and the early Vietnam War. And there are certainly no suggestions that John F. Kennedy's private life was anything less than impeccable.

To be sure, some changes are on the way. Traditionally, the family has refused to acknowledge the Nov. 22 date as a historical marker, preferring to celebrate the President's May 29 birthday each year. But surveys indicate that 30% of the visitors to the museum, especially young people, remember Kennedy chiefly as the President who was assassinated in Dallas.

Powers concedes that "we are going to have to face it," adding: "You could go through the museum and not know what happened."

Soon the museum will be expanded, he says, and new exhibits will be mounted. New emphasis will be placed on the missile crisis and other major events of the Kennedy presidency that a younger generation might not understand. At the very least, he suggests, there might be an exhibit showing the late President's desk as he left it before the trip to Texas, flanked by a TV screen relaying the first words of the assassination.

But some things remain inviolate. It isn't easy for Powers to discuss the wave of Kennedy-bashing that has become popular in recent years. All he'll say is that

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the family reputation will not be tarnished by such recurring criticism and that most Americans still think fondly of the Kennedys.

Even though some revelations have gained wide credibility among historians and journalists, such as Exner's story, Powers fiercely denies them. Even if her story were true, Powers says, its overall importance has been overblown.

Asked about speculation that he figures in Exner's account, Powers briskly changes the subject. Looking across the room at a bust of JFK, he starts discussing the late President's policies on education and speculates on what his life after the presidency would have been like.

Pressed to answer the Exner question again, Powers' eyes narrow and he says his critics "are

misinformed . . . they're out in that gossip range."

Then a smile spreads over his face, and he reaches for a Rolodex on his desk. It contains hundreds of quotes that John F. Kennedy used in his public speeches. Powers scans it quickly and comes up with a statement by Abraham Lincoln that his friend loved:

"If I were to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any business. I do the very best I can, and I mean to keep doing so until the end.

"If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, 10 angels swearing I was right would make no difference."

Powers looks up with a grin. "That kind of says it all, I think."