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Historic Sites and Interpretation in Minnesota

THOMAS A. WOODS

Historic Sites: A Definition

In a 1978 survey, the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) defined a museum as "an institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a staff, owns or uses tangible objects, whether animate or inanimate, cares for those objects and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis." The survey identified over two thousand history museums in the United States, and the majority of these museums were historic sites, a major type of history museum (1). A key element in the IMS definition of a history museum is the recognition that a museum's primary role is in using a collection to educate the public. Today, history museums in the United States are visited by approximately one hundred million people annually (2). This clearly illustrates that programming at historic sites constitutes a vital method of historical education throughout the United States.

Historic sites have been divided into three distinctly different categories by historic site professionals: "1) the documentary site associated with an historical event or person; 2) the representative site depicting a period of history or way of life; and 3) the aesthetic site displaying exceptional examples of furnishings in period rooms (3)." These sites come in many different forms. They include "domestic structures (city dwellings and farms of both prominent individuals and common people); communities (neighborhoods, villages/towns, utopian settlements); industrial and commercial sites (factories, mills, trading posts, taverns, general stores); transportation sites (trails, canals, railroad depots, ships); military and governmental sites (battlefields and forts, courthouses and town/city halls); educational and religious structures (schools and churches); monuments and cemeteries; prehistoric and Native American sites; historic landscapes and environments. Historic site museums encompass historic houses, living history farms, architectural parks, restored villages, folk parks, and open-air museums (4)."

The Origins and Development of Historic Sites in the United States

There are basically two types of historic sites in the United States—open air museums and house museums. The first

historic site to be preserved in the United States was the Hasbrouck House in Newburgh, New York. The house had served as George Washington's headquarters during the Revolutionary War. After a lengthy struggle to preserve it, it became the nation's first house museum in 1850. General Winfield Scott dedicated it by raising the United States flag over the house on the Fourth of July (5). A second type of historic house commonly preserved is the log structure of the first settler of a local area. The Hasbrouck House and the log house typify the historic sites movement—particularly house museums—in the United States, which has been characterized by the commemoration of significant events, the achievements of great people (usually men), or the idealization of the romantic past (6).

Open-air museums represent a different sort of historic site. The first open air museum was Skansen, founded in 1881 by Artur Hazelius in Sweden. Hazelius moved buildings which represented the life of the common Swedish folk onto a museum site to preserve and interpret them. Dissatisfied with the educational and entertainment value of the collected structures, Hazelius promoted a new kind of interpretive approach in which docents dressed in folk costumes demonstrate folk crafts in and around the structures. This new interpretive technique proved to be an effective and popular educational method. Open-air museums in the United States combined the Skansen and American house museum technique. Some open-air historic sites, like Colonial Williamsburg, commemorate famous people and events and examples of significant architecture. At Colonial Williamsburg, the origins of America are celebrated at the colonial capital of Virginia where early revolutionary leaders met to debate the fate of the country among themselves and with the British governor. Colonial Williamsburg began using costumed guides in 1932 and craft demonstrators followed soon after (7).

The most pervasive recent influences on historic site development and interpretation have been the living history farm movement and the "new social history." The living history farm movement emerged in the 1970s and combined a growing interest in ordinary people and everyday life with the desire to re-create fully functional, typical farms of past periods. One of the first such farms to be developed was the Pliny Freeman Farm at Old Sturbridge Village. The Freeman Farm had been moved into the Village earlier, but in 1970, it was converted into an operating farm, complete with crops, animals, equipment, and domestic activities of the 1830s. The Association of Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums was established to coordinate the budding interest in living history farms in 1970. Generally, living history farms have interpreted the lives of Anglo middle class farm families. However, within the past ten years, significant efforts have

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been made at living history farms and other historic sites to incorporate more of the history of previously forgotten groups in American history: women, blacks, American Indians, and other ethnic groups whose stories have seldom been told at historic sites. Living history farms and the new social history movement have effectively influenced other historic sites to use living history methods to interpret new social history themes (8).

Education at Historic Sites

As the definition of museums offered earlier illustrates, education is a primary goal of museums. In historic site settings, educational programming is generally called interpretation. Interpretation is the means used to convey the historical significance of a site to the public, the way a guide, or interpreter, "tells the meaning" of the past. Interpretation is a critical function at a museum, because without engaging interpretation, the best collection and research lies inert and meaningless to the visiting public. Freeman Tilden has defined interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (9)." The lifeblood of interpretation lies in inspiration and provocation, in lighting a spark of interest in the visitor that can later be fanned into a flame of awareness, not in the transmission of factual information (10).

Good interpretation is a democratic form of education.

To be effective, educational programming at sites must be designed to accommodate the different learning characteristics of a diverse public audience. Psychologist Jean Piaget has had a significant impact on school curriculums. His theory of human conceptual development is the foundation on which most contemporary school curriculums have been built. Piaget argues that children progress through stages of understanding that range from sensorimotor (experiential learning) to concrete-operational (abstract thinking). According to subsequent studies, though, it appears that many people never acquire the ability to abstract. Consequently, one of the most successful teaching techniques for children will emphasize participatory learning experiences. Piaget and other theorists also have argued that learning in people of all ages occurs in three distinct categories—cognitive, affective, and motor. In general, people have individual learning styles that emphasize a particular category of learning. Learning styles are developed through both inherent and acquired abilities and proclivities. Some people learn primarily through lecture or abstract discussion, others are primarily participatory learners, and some learn best through observation. In general, a successful teaching strategy for a general audience will incorporate all three of these learning opportunities (11).

Good interpretation is a democratic form of education. It accommodates a variety of audiences and learning styles. According to one leading authority on museums, "Interpretation relies heavily on sensory perception—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and the kinetic muscle sense—to enable the museum-goer emotionally to experience objects. This interpretation complements the rational process of learning through words and verbalization (12)." To accommodate the

different audiences that visit historic sites, interpretation must be based on a multifaceted approach that blends lecture, participation, and observation. Good interpretive programs will also offer choices that enable individual members of the audience to maximize their learning experience, a consideration that will also enhance visitors' enjoyment of their time spent at a historic site.

The lifeblood of interpretation lies in inspiration and provocation, in lighting a spark of interest.

Origins of the Minnesota Historical Society Historic Sites Network

A concern for history has a long tradition in Minnesota. In one of its first actions soon after convening in 1849, the territorial legislature created the Minnesota Historical Society to collect, preserve, and interpret the territory's history. More than a hundred years after creating the Minnesota Historical Society, the state legislature officially recognized the importance of historic sites by passing the Omnibus Natural Resources and Recreation Act of 1963 which created the historic sites network. It was this act that recognized historic sites as a valued resource in Minnesota and dedicated significant new state funds for the support of the long range preservation, restoration, and interpretation of historic sites in Minnesota.

The Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Resources Commission (MORRC) was created by the Omnibus Natural Resources and Recreation Act to make recommendations for the creation of a historic sites network. The Commission's 1964 report stated, "Historic sites, when preserved and developed, provide educational, recreational, and economic benefits to the state and have been recognized by the legislature as an important part of the resource program for Minnesota (13)." The Commission proposed a state-sponsored ten-year program for developing a historic sites network and its report included the first biennial budget request for Minnesota Historical Society historic sites.

The MORRC Report compiled a list of seventy nine significant places worthy of protection and interpretation. This list later became the official State Registry of Historic Sites and Places. Although the Minnesota Historical Society soon discovered that it would not be possible to own, preserve, develop, and interpret such a large number of historic sites, both the State Registry and the National Register of Historic Places created by Congress in 1966 have been keys in helping the Minnesota Historical Society select historic sites to include in its network. Both the MORRC Report and the National Register identified specific thematic areas and criteria designed to measure a site's significance. These thematic areas and criteria have undergone frequent revision and the Minnesota Historical Society, in turn, has selectively used these criteria to create its own criteria for selecting its historic sites.

Selecting Historic Sites in Minnesota

In 1977, the Minnesota Historical Society prepared an interpretation plan for a task force of the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources. The report identified seventeen themes important to the state's history and divided the

state into nine regions with distinctly different historical experiences. The themes included the following:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Prehistoric Peoples | 9. Immigration |
| 2. Historic Indian Tribes | 10. Ethnic Groups |
| 3. The Fur Trade | 11. Agriculture |
| 4. Exploration | 12. Milling |
| 5. Transportation | 13. Lumber |
| 6. Military History | 14. Mining |
| 7. Settlement | 15. Medicine |
| 8. Government | 16. Labor |
| | 17. Conservation |

Since 1977, these regional and thematic groupings have been the basis for guiding decision-making on historic site acquisition and development (14).

The Minnesota Historical Society currently owns thirty-one historic sites. Developed and managed by the Society's Historic Sites Department, this network of historic sites consists of individual historic sites that have been selected for their state and national importance in interpreting the history of the people of Minnesota within the 1977 thematic and regional matrix. At the present time, fifteen of these sites are actively interpreted to the public by the Society. The rest are closed for development, owned for preservation purposes, or operated by local or county historical societies through management agreements. (See Table 1.)

Interpreting Minnesota's Historic Sites

Minnesota has been a leader in using innovative interpretive techniques to create an entertaining, educational experience for the visiting public. Ft. Snelling, for example, was one of the first historic sites in the country to use living history interpretation. Developed in the early 1970s, the living history program at Ft. Snelling became a national model, particularly for historic fort sites. At Ft. Snelling, it is always 1827, and when visitors enter the walls of the fort, they are enveloped by the sights and sounds of the past.

Both the Forest History Center and the Oliver Kelley Farm emerged from the new social history and living history farms movement in the late 1970s. Although the Forest History Center is the only site within the historic sites network which is not located on an actual site, it fulfills an important function by interpreting the interaction of humankind and nature in the northern Minnesota forested region. The reconstructed logging camp uses living history methods to vivify the everyday experiences of turn-of-the-century Minnesotans who derived their living from harvesting the bountiful timber.

Although the Oliver Kelley Farm was selected as a historic site because Kelley was the organizer of the Grange in 1867, the interpretation has centered on the dynamics of change in agriculture in post-Civil War Minnesota and how the change from semi-subsistence agriculture to capital-intensive, full-

Table 1. Historic sites owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

SITE	THEMES	STATUS
1. Alexander Ramsey House	politics, government	Int.
2. Birch Coulee Battlefield	military	Int.
3. Burbank-Livingston-Griggs House	commerce, social, architecture	Dev.
4. Comstock House	politics	Int.
5. Crane Lake	fur trade	MA
6. Forest History Center	forest, lumber	Int.
7. Fort Renville	fur trade	Pres.
8. Fort Ridgely History Center	military	Int.
9. Grand Mound and History Center	prehistoric Indians	Int.
10. Harkin Store	commerce	MA
11. Historic Fort Snelling	military	Int.
12. James J. Hill House	transportation, commerce	Int.
13. Jeffers Petroglyphs	prehistoric Indians	Int.
14. Lac Qui Parle Mission	missionary	MA
15. Lindbergh House and History Center	politics, transportation	Int.
16. Lower Sioux Agency and History Center	historic Indians	Int.
17. Marine Mill Site	lumber	Pres.
18. Meighen Store	commerce	Dev.
19. Mille Lacs Indian Museum	prehistoric, historic Indians	Int.
20. Minnehaha Depot	transportation	MA
21. Minnesota State Capitol	government, architecture	Int.
22. Morrison Mounds	prehistoric Indians	Pres.
23. North West Co. Fur Post	fur trade	Int.
24. Oliver H. Kelley Farm and History Center	agriculture	Int.
25. Split Rock Lighthouse and History Center	transportation	Int.
26. Stumne Mounds	prehistoric Indians	Pres.
27. Traverse Des Sioux	settlement	Dev.
28. Upper Sioux Agency	historic Indians	Dev.
29. William LeDuc House	military	Dev.
30. W.H.C. Folsom House	lumber	MA
31. W.W. Mayo House	medicine	MA

(Key to status: Int.—Interpreted; MA—Management Agreement; Dev.—Closed for development; Pres.—Owned for preservation purposes.)

scale commercial agriculture led farmers into conflict with monopoly capitalists who controlled the transportation, marketing, and manufacturing resources. Through a living history re-creation of the Kelley family farm operation in the post-Civil War period, interpreters are able to immerse visitors in experiences similar to those of mid-nineteenth century farmers. Once involved in daily farm activities, the public audience can more easily conceptualize the problems faced by farmers in the period which motivated Kelley and others to organize the Grange as a farm protest organization.

Other Minnesota sites use innovative techniques to carry their interpretive messages. The James J. Hill House uses dramatic vignettes to interest the audience in the history of the people and issues associated with the house. To balance the interpretation, which focuses on James J. Hill, the site provides special programming like "A Servant's Christmas." During this special event, the audience winds through the house, meeting various servants at their stations and eaves dropping on their conversations, learning about the lives of these obscure individuals who provided services for the rich and famous Hill family.

Many Minnesota historic sites have educational programs specially designed for school children. To balance the abstract nature of their general tour programs, the Alexander Ramsey House and the Minnesota State Capital have both begun to develop dramatic vignettes and school programs which emphasize participation to interest children and enhance their learning experiences. Similarly, the Grand Mound Interpretive Center has developed special programs like a trail throwing which help children understand the tools and food gathering techniques of the prehistoric Indians who built the burial mounds at the site.

The idea of linking interpretive centers with historic sites was an important innovation in Minnesota that enables sites with such centers to use a diversity of interpretive delivery systems like exhibits, audio visual shows, and dramatic vignettes to maximize each site's particular strengths and special situation. "Split Rock Light," the audiovisual program at Split Rock Lighthouse, for example, has won national acclaim for its use of the medium of film to integrate the living history format with a historical account of the development of the lighthouse.

Challenges for the Future

As a result of our selection criteria, Minnesota has focused on collecting historic sites that commemorate special events or famous people, particularly nineteenth century Anglo men. We have no sites which focus on women, black Minnesotans, or on the lives of common urban laborers. Although Minnesota is unusual in preserving and interpreting a large number of American Indian sites—both historic and prehistoric, we barely interpret the other diverse ethnic groups of the state. Some of these themes could be interpreted at existing sites. But we need to look more closely at the present thematic groupings and the criteria we use to select sites, so we can better encompass Minnesota's diverse cultural groups. We need to select sites that can tell the stories of those people whose histories have not previously been told. Plans are already being made to analyze the programs at sites we currently interpret to see if we can improve our interpretation of these sites by including some of the untold stories. We will soon face the challenges of reviewing the present historic sites network and confronting the difficult decision of deaccessioning certain historic sites that duplicate

similar stories told at other sites within the system more effectively.

Minnesota has been in the vanguard of preserving and interpreting historic sites in the past. To maintain that position of leadership, the state will need to continue its past generous support for our historic sites network. As major custodians of the history of Minnesota, we will need to concentrate on telling the stories of our diverse population and we will have to tell those stories with imaginative methods that allow the past to touch the present.

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