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## Fitting in

Sound criteria and planning guide decisions to accession historic properties

Most historical organizations have policies in place to guide their collecting activities. Often, however, those policies do not extend to the acquisition of historic structures. Yet the same considerations apply, whether you're deciding to accept an artifact for your museum's collection or debating the addition of a building.

"It all boils down to fit and sustainability," says Tim Glines, manager of outreach services for the Minnesota Historical Society. "Before you assume ownership of a property, you need to ask yourself some tough questions. Most important, does the property fit your mission? If so, can you afford to maintain it?"

### Key questions

Those are just two of the questions to consider when you have the opportunity to acquire a historic structure. Too often, in a rush to save the property, well-intentioned groups skip the crucial step of assessing the soundness of the undertaking. Glines suggests using a set of feasibility questions like those his Local History Services staff devised to guide groups pondering the startup of a new museum.

"The same kinds of questions can serve as your measuring stick when you're weighing the pros and cons of acquiring a building," says Glines. "They even help when you're wrestling with the difficult issue of whether or not to keep a

building you already own." Here are some of the questions to ask:

- How does the property fit your organization's mission?
- What significant story does the property tell?
- Are there other properties in your region that tell the same story?
- Will the property be readily accessible to your primary audience?
- Have you identified a corps of volunteers and supporters prepared to share the tasks of renovating the property and maintaining it over the years?
- Where will the funding come from to carry out these activities?

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Dakota City Heritage Village

Winter settles quietly on Dakota City, a recreated 1900-era rural village on the Dakota County Fairgrounds.

## Fitting in – continued

### A wait pays off

A set of criteria helped guide the Dakota City board as it looked for just the right farmhouse to add to its heritage village on the Dakota County Fairgrounds. Established in the 1970s, the site today contains 27 structures – some historic properties, some reconstructions – typical of a 1900-era rural village. To augment the businesses represented, the board wanted to add houses.

In 2004 the group had the luxury of choosing among offers for three different farmhouses. Because each building required a large investment of money as well as staff and volunteer time, only one of the houses could be chosen. Explains Richard Williams, the site’s director of public programs, “Charlie Nelson, then the Minnesota Historical Society’s historical architect, looked at all three buildings with us and

advised us on which one best fit our needs.” Nelson identified several factors for the Dakota City board to consider:

- What is the age and condition of each building?
- How will it be interpreted and used?
- What are relocation and restoration costs likely to be?
- What are the ongoing operational costs?

The board’s facilities committee settled on an 1870s farmhouse offered by Rosemount resident Michael McMenemy, who also made a gift of \$20,000 to help with relocation costs. Then, in 2005, the finance committee took on the challenge of moving the house to its new fairgrounds site.

“It took months to negotiate,” recalls Williams. “We had to arrange for local utility companies to move power lines. We got permits from several township boards to use their roads. In fact, we had to improve one of the roads before we could use it. And then the Dakota County sheriff escorted the move. The whole undertaking turned out to be much more expensive than we thought it would be.”

The house is now in place awaiting restoration, estimated to take two years. Funds will come from donations and grants. “There are so many farmhouses in our area that have been abandoned,” says Williams. “People want us to save them. We can’t take them all but now this one will get a new lease on life.”

### An offer they couldn’t refuse

When the Three Rivers Park District assumed management of Historic Murphy’s Landing near Shakopee

in 2002, staff undertook a study to assess the site. The living history museum had been established more than 30 years earlier, by a privately run nonprofit group called the Minnesota Valley Restoration Project, to interpret the lives of European immigrant settlers along the Minnesota River between 1840 and 1890. Over the years, some 40 structures had been moved to the site but the proliferation of buildings had outstripped the organization’s means to maintain them.

Stewardship of historic resources was not new for the park district but running a living history site was. So they called in a team of consultants, the 106 Group, to help them clarify a vision for the site. “The 106 Group guided the whole process,” says site supervisor Kathy Dummer. “They held open meetings in the community, talked to all our stakeholders and studied the marketplace. Then they came up with a comprehensive plan for interpretation and site development that maps our direction for the future.”

During the study, all the buildings were analyzed on a matrix of criteria, including historical significance, structural integrity and appropriateness to the interpretive themes. Among the buildings that landed low on the matrix was the 1880 Savage Depot, which had been moved to Murphy’s Landing 20 years earlier. “It was one of two train depots at the site,” says Dummer, “but there weren’t two different stories to tell. While the building was functional, we decided it didn’t serve a thematic purpose for us.”



Dakota City Heritage Village

Now in place at Dakota City Heritage Village, the McMenemy farmhouse sits on timbers awaiting a new foundation. Full restoration will proceed as funds allow.



Just as the staff debated how to repurpose the property, an opportunity fell into their laps: Representatives from the Dan Patch Historical Society and the City of Savage approached the park district with a request to return the depot. After a year of negotiations and planning, the depot was moved back to Savage in July of 2006.

“The 106 Group’s building analysis will drive our rehabilitation work going forward,” says Dummer. “We’re making sound decisions about some of our marginal properties. And now we’re hoping to add a visitor center and an education building. The master plan has given Murphy’s Landing a kind of rebirth.”

### Back in private hands

Public ownership wasn’t the answer for another outdoor site in need of new life. During the several decades that the Wirtanen Finnish Farmstead near Markham was operated by the St. Louis County Historical Society, it seemed there was never enough money in the budget to maintain the dozen log buildings properly. Though the site was well loved by the surrounding communities, the county society board finally made the painful decision to close it.

But a grassroots effort to preserve this piece of the county’s Finnish heritage took hold, and in 2001 a dedicated group of volunteers, the Friends of the Wirtanen Pioneer Farm, assumed ownership of the property. Reopened under private nonprofit management, the site is undergoing restoration and visitors are once again welcome for

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Three Rivers Park District photos

After 20 years at Historic Murphy’s Landing (top), the 1880 Savage Depot was readied for its move back to Savage last fall. Its roof made the journey separately.



## Fitting in – continued

Friends of the Wirtanen Pioneer Farm



Early in the 20th century, Finnish homesteader Eli Wirtanen built this house and barn of hand-hewn logs harvested from his land. Today, the farmstead in St. Louis County is operated as a historic site by the Friends of the Wirtanen Pioneer Farm.



self-guided tours. Projects such as the addition of accessible restrooms and a walking trail are now funded by memberships, donations, grants and the occasional bake sale. The volunteers' hope: what public funds were unable to support, private interests will help create – an open-air museum promoting Finnish immigrant history and culture.

### A community steps up

With maintenance costs rising on its three very different historic properties – a steam locomotive, a log cabin and an 1893 house, the Kandiyohi County Historical Society faced a dilemma familiar to many organizations: how to continue caring for the properties with limited resources already stretched thin.

The house – a local landmark built by prosperous farmer and businessman Albert Sperry – posed a particularly urgent problem. In 1970 Sperry descendants had willed the house to the City of Willmar, which turned it over to the county historical society to operate as a historic site. But without extra funds

to maintain it, the society found itself unable to make necessary improvements. In 2002, armed with cost estimates for restoration from Charlie Nelson and advice from Tim Glines on the ramifications of deaccessioning the property, the county society approached the Willmar City Council.

Hearings on the fate of the Sperry House drew a crowd of local citizens,



An infusion of funds from the City of Willmar has helped the Kandiyohi County Historical Society renovate the 1893 Sperry House. Reconstruction of the front porch will add the finishing touch.

who lobbied to have it remain a historic site open to the public. Their efforts met with success. With \$100,000 in new funds from the city, granted over five years, the Kandiyohi County Historical Society tackled renovation projects one by one, from roof, furnace and window replacement to new tuckpointing, sidewalks and porches.

With those big projects done, the county society is now developing a long-range fundraising plan for ongoing maintenance. "Moving forward, we'll have an easier time keeping up with the care of the house," says Mona Nelson, KCHS director. "I'm so proud of the city of Willmar for stepping up to preserve this part of our history."

### A recipe for success

Clear criteria. Thoughtful debate. Careful planning. It's an approach that has paid off for many groups wrestling with the pros and cons of acquiring historic properties. With criteria in place, you'll be ready to respond to unexpected offers. With reasoned debate, you can weigh your options. And with sound planning, you'll make the right decisions for your organization – and your community.

For more information about the examples in this article, contact:

- Richard Williams, director of public programs, Dakota City Heritage Village, 651-460-8050 or [programdirector@dakotacity.org](mailto:programdirector@dakotacity.org).
- Kathy Dummer, site supervisor, Historic Murphy's Landing, 763-694-7784 or [KDummer@threeriversparkdistrict.org](mailto:KDummer@threeriversparkdistrict.org).
- Darlene Saumer, Friends of the Wirtanen Pioneer Farm, 218-638-2859 or [info@wirtanenfarm.org](mailto:info@wirtanenfarm.org).
- Mona Nelson, director, Kandiyohi County Historical Society, 320-235-1881 or [kandhist@msn.com](mailto:kandhist@msn.com). ■

Kandiyohi County Historical Society

## Charlie Nelson's legacy

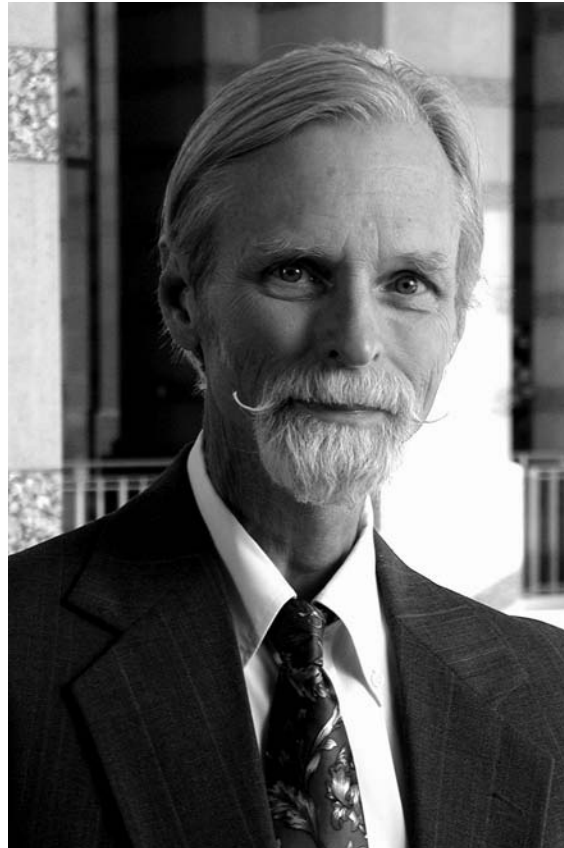
Historic preservation fund ensures that his work will continue

**Editor's note:** Just after the March-April issue of the *Interpreter* went to press, we learned of the death of Charlie Nelson, the Minnesota Historical Society's longtime historical architect, who retired in 2004. This article draws partly from a tribute to him in the November-December 2003 issue of *Member News*.

For more than three decades, Charlie Nelson played a key role in Minnesota's historic preservation scene. Widely recognized by his trim goatee and respected for his vast knowledge of the state's architectural resources, he shared his expertise with many historical organizations and municipalities. Through his "tireless dedication, personal passion and creative problem solving," says Britta Bloomberg, deputy state historic preservation officer, "Charlie helped preserve countless properties across the state."

Nelson got in on the ground floor of the preservation movement, joining the staff of the State Historic Preservation Office not long after passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. He was named the state's historical architect in 1978. During his years on the job, he saw historic preservation grow from a fledgling endeavor to a thriving professional field.

Among his career highlights, Nelson counted log-building field schools held in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service and the Minnesota DNR; his work with architects and developers rehabilitating income-producing properties with one-half billion dollars in federal historic preservation tax incentives; and the many



*Charlie Nelson (photo by Eric Mortenson).*

reuse studies that spurred grassroots preservation efforts around the state.

Before he retired, Nelson established the Charlie Nelson Fund for Historic Preservation to foster education and public awareness of historic preservation in Minnesota. Among other projects, monies from this fund have been used to create the SHPO presence on the MHS web site and support reuse studies of threatened properties, using a model that Nelson helped develop. Most recently, the Nelson fund made possible a reuse study for the B'Nai Abraham

Synagogue in Virginia, with matching funds raised locally.

"We have the legacy of Charlie Nelson in so many places in Minnesota," said Nina Archabal, executive director of the Minnesota Historical Society, in a eulogy delivered at Nelson's funeral. "We can find his footprints on much-traveled roads and on dirt ones. We know a lot more about Minnesota's historic places, thanks to his work. He taught us how to care for our log cabins and lighthouses, our bridges and barns. We continue to draw inspiration from the wisdom Charlie imparted." ■

To learn more about the Charlie Nelson Fund for Historic Preservation or to make a gift, call Mark Haidet, MHS senior major gifts officer, at 651-259-3123 or toll-free 1-888-293-4440, or e-mail [mark.haidet@mnhs.org](mailto:mark.haidet@mnhs.org).



## Preserving family history

Conservation workshops offer advice on caring for memorabilia

As part of the Minnesota Historical Society's ongoing project Minnesota's Greatest Generation, outreach conservator Bob Herskovitz continues his series of conservation workshops to help Minnesotans preserve their family history. Offering practical approaches to preserving family memorabilia – letters, photographs and other materials, particularly from the World War II era – Herskovitz demonstrates how to care for, store and display family treasures. He also covers guidelines for creating oral histories.

**May 13: Lake City**

City Hall, 1:30 p.m.

Sponsor: Lake City Historical Society, Lake City Historic Preservation Commission.

Call 651-345-9951.

**May 14: Luverne**

Rock County Historical Society, 1:30 p.m.

Sponsor: Rock County Historical Society.

Call 507-283-2913.

**June 5: Richfield**

Richfield Historical Society, 1:30 p.m.

Sponsor: Richfield Historical Society.

Call 612-798-6140.

Herskovitz is now scheduling workshops for the summer and fall. To host a workshop in your community, call 651-297-3896 or e-mail [bob.herskovitz@mnhs.org](mailto:bob.herskovitz@mnhs.org). For more information on the Minnesota Historical Society's Greatest Generation project, go to [www.mnhs.org/people/mgg](http://www.mnhs.org/people/mgg). ■



MHS photo by Peter Lanter

Family memorabilia can last for generations with proper care, storage and display.

**'Minnesota on Paper'**

In "Minnesota on Paper: Collecting Our Printed History," authors Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris trace 150 years of Minnesota history through its ephemera. From postcards and product ads to event broadsides and merchant giveaways, these bits of the state's past reveal much about the growth of Minnesota businesses, the evolution of printing technology and the history of graphic design and advertising. University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Paper, 221 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 0-8166-4555-8. For additional information and to order, go to [www.upress.umn.edu/Books/H/harris\\_minnesota.html](http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/H/harris_minnesota.html).

## Workshop covers ABCs of digitization

On July 11-13 the AASLH brings to the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul a three-day workshop titled “Digitization and Museums,” designed especially for curators, archivists and librarians interested in digitizing primary source materials.

### The agenda

Day 1 of the workshop introduces the issues involved in digital project management, such as selection of materials, legal considerations, benefits of collaboration and required resources.

Day 2 covers basic digital imaging techniques and best practices, from quality control and storage of image

files to concepts of digital preservation. Day 3 concentrates on creating Dublin Core Metadata for digital cultural heritage collections. Both days include hands-on exercises.

Instructors are Jill M. Koelling, director, and Leigh A. Grinstead, projects coordinator, both of the Collaborative Digitization Project in Colorado. Koelling is also author of “Digital Imaging: A Practical Approach.”

### Register now

For a complete agenda and registration information, go to [www.aaslh.org/DigitizationAgenda.htm](http://www.aaslh.org/DigitizationAgenda.htm). The 56 openings in this workshop will be filled

on a first-come, first-served basis. The cost for all three days: \$200 for AASLH members, \$250 for nonmembers. For individual days: \$70 for AASLH members, \$85 for nonmembers.

Want to know what some of your Minnesota colleagues think on the subject of digitization? Check out their discussion in the Minnesota Local History blog, “Putting Collections Online,” at <http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory/index.cfm/2007/2/15/Putting-Collections-Online>. ■

## Opportunity at your doorstep

Scholarships available for National Preservation Conference in St. Paul

This fall, the National Preservation Conference comes to the Twin Cities. How can you take part? Apply now for one of the 100 scholarships available for Minnesota applicants whose attendance will benefit their communities.

The conference, scheduled for Oct. 2-6 in St. Paul, is sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It will bring together historic preservation experts and community leaders from across the country for five days of education sessions, workshops, discussion groups, field sessions and tours of the Twin Cities area. This is a great opportunity to expand your knowledge of historic preservation for the benefit of your community’s economic well-being.

The scholarship program, made possible by the National Trust through a partnership with Minnesota Landmarks and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, is intended to increase conference attendance from greater Minnesota and draw Minnesotans of diverse backgrounds. Scholarships cover the cost of registration, including all education sessions, one field session and one other ticketed event; transportation and lodging are not covered.

### Who should apply?

- People from rural areas, regional centers and small towns.
- Individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, economic, social and cultural groups.

- Museum professionals and others interested in cultural heritage, cultural memories and oral traditions.
- Students interested in architecture, history and preservation.

### How to apply

Download the scholarship application from the Preservation Alliance’s web site at [www.mnpreservation.org](http://www.mnpreservation.org). If you have questions or need a hard copy of the application form, call Kelli Andre at 651-293-9047 or e-mail [kandre@mnpreservation.org](mailto:kandre@mnpreservation.org).

Applications must be received in the Alliance office by **June 1**. ■

## Deadlines for state grants-in-aid

Plan now to apply for the fall round of state grants-in-aid and state capital project grants-in-aid. Application deadlines are:

**July 27:** Pre-application due.

**Aug. 31:** Final application due.

**Oct. 9:** Grants Review Committee meets.

State grants-in-aid are awarded in the categories of historic properties, artifact collections, microform copies, oral history, manuscripts collections, museum environments and technology. Monies for this program depend on a biennial appropriation from the Minnesota Legislature. Updated

information on the current legislative session will be posted in the MHS Local History News e-newsletter. To subscribe, go to <http://discovery.mnhs.org/enews/>.

Matching grants for historic preservation projects of a capital nature are awarded only to county and local jurisdictions. At least \$200,000 remains for this second year of the state's two-year bonding cycle.

For details about the two grant programs, including guidelines, eligibility and application forms, go to [www.mnhs.org/about/grants/](http://www.mnhs.org/about/grants/). ■

## Two more chances

It's not too late to catch a Local History Services workshop. Two more regional meetings remain, both addressing the theme "striving for excellence." They are:

**May 11:** Chisholm

**May 21:** Roseau

Sessions offer strategies for engaging visitors, planning outdoor exhibits, using archaeological collections, raising funds and more. To register, call David Grabitske at 651-259-3460. ■

### About this publication

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[www.mnhs.org/lhs](http://www.mnhs.org/lhs)



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