Minnesota History
# Interpreter

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## In this issue



# Pieces of the past

Should you save fragments of significant buildings when you can't save the whole thing?

It's a common conundrum. A building of significance in your community is about to be torn down. Efforts to save it have failed, and now, before it falls to the wrecking ball, you must decide if you should try to save at least part of the structure. You will no doubt find yourself wrestling with some difficult questions: Does acquiring the fragment make sense for your organization? And what will you do with it after you've said yes?

There are no easy answers – only some things to consider as you grapple with your decision. The following discussion will get you thinking about the pros and cons of salvaging architectural remnants.

## What to consider

There is at least one good reason for saving architectural elements of a local landmark: salvaging key parts limits historical losses from the teardown and ensures preservation of some of the structure's historic fabric.

There also may be political factors to weigh or a public relations benefit to saving an iconic part of a well-known building. That's what Marci Matson, executive director of the Edina Historical Society, learned about a cornerstone in the society's collection – a brick square with "1954" etched in it, salvaged from the old city hall. "We've saved pieces of historic buildings in the past, including the old Edina mill," she says. "I view this cornerstone as just a relic but some board members believe it has significance."

David Grabitske, manager of outreach services for the Minnesota Historical Society, suggests putting the word *significance* to the test. "Ask yourself whether the object in question has meaning based on some key criteria," he advises:

- **Integrity:** Does the object retain the spirit of the original structure – in its location, design, materials, workmanship? If the object survives in a largely unaltered state, the answer is probably yes.

- **Context:** Is there enough of the object's original context – setting, associations – to convey the significance of the place? Like all museum objects, your architectural remnant should be able to tell a story – or better yet, multiple stories.

**Pieces of the past** – continued on page 2

Hennepin History Museum

*For 90 years a five-foot-long weathervane of the Archangel Gabriel perched atop a succession of buildings at the Falls of St. Anthony in Minneapolis. In 1947 it was given to the Hennepin County Historical Society, now the Hennepin History Museum, which adopted the figure as its official logo in 1999.*

### Minnesota observes statehood week May 11-18

On May 11 Minnesota will reach its 150th anniversary as the 32nd state. Statehood week culminates May 17-18 in a weekend festival on the State Capitol grounds. For a Sesquicentennial calendar of the year-long commemoration, go to www.mn150years.org. Turn to page 7 for news of just some of the projects planned around the state.

150 YEARS of STATEHOOD 1858 · 2008

## Pieces of the past – continued

The overriding consideration when debating the acquisition of architectural remnants is whether the object fits your organization's mission and collecting policies. Be sure to weigh the merits of acquiring such items as you would any other kind of artifact, says Grabitske.

Meeting those criteria are the many architectural fragments in the collection of the Hennepin County Medical Center History Museum. "Our museum is filled with parts and pieces of the old Minneapolis General Hospital," says HCMC's Suzanne Fischer, " – pieces of marble, decorative stonework, the metal G from the hospital façade – that evoke the original luxury and later dilapidation of the hospital. Our employee volunteers gathered up as much as they could before the old building was demolished. One nurse even came in at night to pry up all the marble tiles from the nursery floor; they now cover a section of our exhibit space. Those physical remnants help tell our story."

Wadena County Historical Society

*This tower, salvaged from the 1886 Wadena County Courthouse when it was torn down in 1970, sat for years at the county fairgrounds, where it fell into disrepair. In 2005 the Wadena County Historical Society agreed to take the familiar local landmark. It now sits on a cement slab, reinforced from the inside, awaiting further repair and landscaping for a legacy garden.*

### The how-to's of architectural salvage

Do-it-yourself salvage can be one of the unexpected aspects of acquiring architectural remnants. When Kathleen Klehr, director of the Scott County Historical Society, arrived at a demolition site to pick up pieces of a Savage farmhouse, she was handed a crowbar and screwdriver instead. Now she advises others to be clear about who will do the salvaging – "and be prepared if it's you. Wear work clothes and leather gloves and bring a pickup to haul away your treasures," she says.

One thing the Scott County society did right was document the site before demolition began. "Our curator spent an afternoon with a camera photographing the site from all angles, inside and out," says Klehr.

Storage and interpretation are two of the biggest challenges posed by architectural artifacts. Klehr is careful to take only what can fit into her museum's collection storage space. "That means sticking to smaller pieces of a building or those that can be stacked or hung from the rafters," she says. The salvaged materials are then used for interpretation – wooden wallboards as a backdrop in exhibits, for example, or porch finials to illustrate house decoration.

Klehr's last piece of advice: "If you're interested in acquiring something, it helps to be on good terms with city officials. They can keep you informed of pending demolitions."

Deciding when to step in to salvage architectural remnants requires a judicious approach. So think carefully. Think creatively. And be realistic. In the end, such decisions are largely situational – best made by weighing the individual merits of each acquisition.

**Join the discussion**

For a blog discussion of this topic, go to http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory/ and click on the category "Collections."

# Creating outdoor trail signage

## Part 1: Planning and design

by Ellen Miller and Aaron Novodvorsky

Authors' note: At the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services workshops in Spring 2007, we presented a talk called "Outdoor exhibits: Place, environment, human stories." Now we've expanded that presentation into a two-part Tech Talk on outdoor trail signs, adding new information, a project timetable and other checklists. Part 1 covers project planning, sign development and design. Part 2, to appear in the July-August 2008 Interpreter, will discuss fabrication and installation.


Minnesota Historical Society photos

*Consider how visitors will use your sign. Does it need to catch the eye of passing drivers? Or is it meant to entice hikers to stop along a trail?*

Suppose there's plenty to see at your outdoor site but not enough visitors know about it. Your board of directors suggests putting up outdoor trail signs like they've seen at other places to draw visitors in. They give you the go-ahead and now it's up to you to make it happen. Don't know where to turn? Here are some strategies to ensure that you end up with signs that will enhance your visitors' experience.

### Start with a basic plan

First, clarify your goal. Think of it as a mission statement for your project: to attract visitors to your outdoor site by creating markers that tell concise stories with compelling images in a form that can withstand all kinds of weather.

Next, rough out a plan. That's the key to any kind of exhibit, no matter how it's delivered. Start by learning as much as you can about your audience. Don't forget the logistics of how they'll use your site. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Who is your audience – children, young adults, families, adults without children, seniors?
- Do they come from the local community or from far away?
- How do they get to your site?
- How will they engage with your outdoor site? Will they walk a trail? Drive through? Ski?
- How long do you want them to stay – 30 minutes? An hour? Two hours?

As you begin to piece together your sign project, remember the 3/30/3 rule, a useful guideline for planning any exhibit. That rule, put forth in the book "Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Place," by Michael Gross, Jim Buchholz and Ron Zimmerman, goes something like this:

- You have three seconds to catch your visitors' attention.
- You have 30 seconds to persuade them to read the text.
- Visitors will spend, on average, three minutes reading and absorbing the information.

That means your signs must be eye-catching, get straight to the point and tell a story succinctly.

**Creating outdoor trail signage** – continued on page 4

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

*What information do you want people to take away? From this sign along the Lewis and Clark Trail, visitors learn why dugout canoes were important to the expedition and how they were made.*


*Connect your story to the environment. A map of this view in Roosevelt National Park shows visitors what they are looking at.*

### Develop your themes

To choose the stories you wish to tell on your signs, think carefully about the site.

- What happened where you want to put the trail signage?
- How will you connect it to what your visitors are looking at?
- Will the site require signs for more than one story?

Once you've determined what the story or stories will be, try putting yourself in the visitors' shoes. Consider the following:

- Why should the story matter to them?
- What information do you want them to take away?

Then concentrate on ways to engage your visitors in the story. Establishing connections with them improves your chances of success under the 3/30/3 rule.

- Tell your stories in the first person. Letting people from the past speak in their own words is much more effective than trying to synthesize their experiences. Visitors will get a better sense of what really happened – and you will build a stronger bridge between the past and present – if those who lived it tell their own story.

- Remember that there is usually more than one side to every story. Seek diverse points of view. If one of your stories deals with a contentious issue, tell all sides of it and let visitors come to their own conclusions.

- Make your signage visually appealing. Whenever possible, link first-person stories to photographs. Let eye-catching graphics work their magic. And make ample use of color.

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

### Use outside experts

Don't hesitate to bring others into your planning process. You're likely to get a far more interesting product if you open yourself up to new ideas and viewpoints.

- Consult experts and specialists in areas related to your subject. If you're doing signs about natural history, for example, call on the Minnesota DNR or recruit a faculty member or graduate student from your local college. Professionals are happy to help and will usually do so for free. Don't be shy about asking.

- If your story involves Native American content, be sure to engage Indian advisors to work with you from the beginning of your project. Don't present them with a finished product, expecting rubber-stamp approval.

- Use volunteers to help you research story content and identify and locate images.

- Tap others in your community, such as local librarians and teachers, to serve as content reviewers. Their input and insights into your subject may prove invaluable.

- Consider hiring an editor to help you polish your text before committing it to print on a long-lasting sign.

As you wrap others into your project, it's important to map out the development process. To break the project into manageable chunks – research, writing and editing, selection of visuals, project review and approval – set some internal deadlines and monitor your progress along the way. This allows for course correction before you've invested a huge amount of time on a theme or story that doesn't pan out.

### Be brief

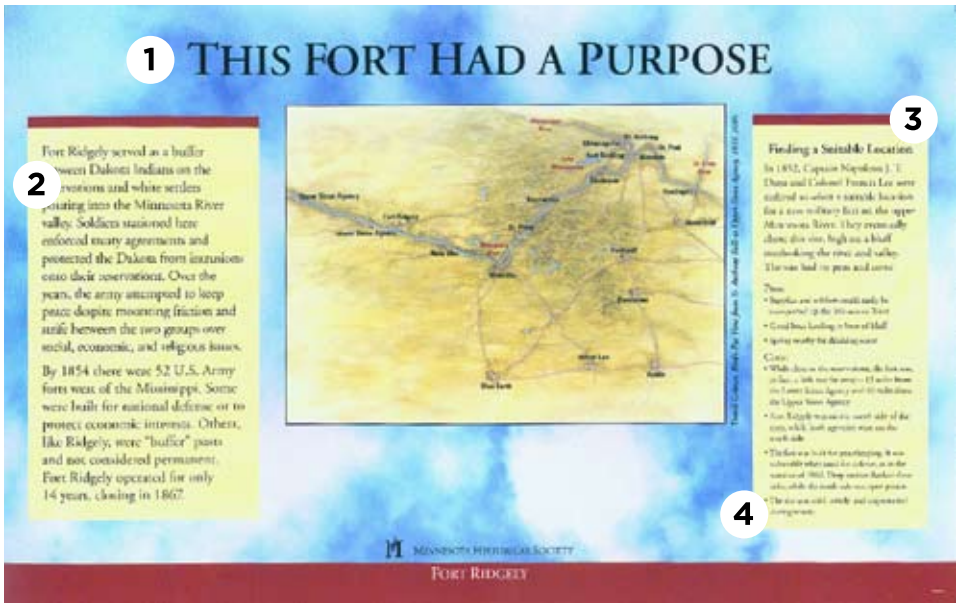
The best signs get their message across with an economy of words. Some suggestions:

- Tell only one story per trail sign.

- Make sure that each story begins and ends on a single panel. If two panels must be used, they should sit side by side. Visitors are unlikely to stick with the story if they have to move from sign to sign to get the gist of it.

- Visitors typically prefer short, easily digestible text sections. Keeping your text to paragraphs of 25 to 75 words each increases the likelihood that visitors will read the sign.

**Creating outdoor trail signage** – continued on page 6




**1. Title:**
attracts attention (1-7 words)

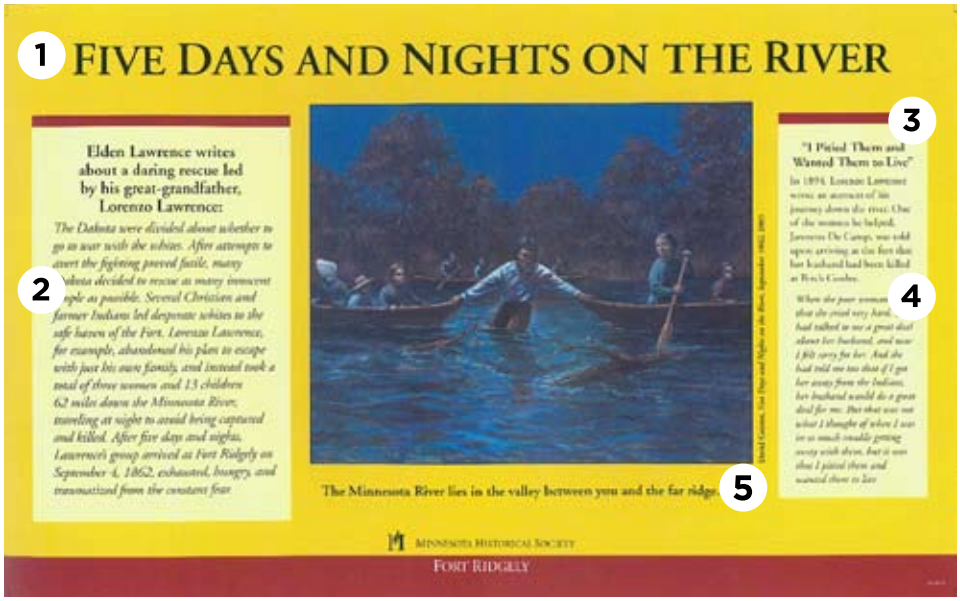
**2. Main label:**
big idea (20-150 words) often includes a lead graphic image

**3. Pull-out quotes:**
gives a voice (5-20 words)

**4. Sidebar:**
more detail or interesting facts (20-75 words)

*To increase chances that your sign will be read, keep blocks of text brief and aim for a balance of one third words, one third images and one third blank space. On this sign about Fort Ridgely, guidelines on word count were stretched for the sake of a good story.*

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued




1. Title: 130 point

2. Main text: 40 point

3. Sidebar title: 36 point

4. Sidebar text: 28 point

5. Graphic ID: 22 point

*Make sure that the font size and style on your sign are easy to read. These sample guidelines for a sign at Fort Ridgely show the relative sizes of various components.*

### Good design is key

Once your stories are written and your images selected, you're ready to begin the design process. This is a critical stage in your project. Without good graphic design, your signs may fail to attract visitors to your site.

For best results, hire a graphic designer rather than doing your own signs. It's a plus to find someone with exhibits experience. Try getting a referral from a site whose signs you have found successful. Look at applicants' design portfolios to make sure they have the kind of experience you need for your project.

### Prepare for production

In this digital age, the end product of the design stage is a CD or DVD containing all the graphics files you'll send on to a production house. To make sure your signs are production-ready, it's important to put them through a final-approval process.

You probably approved the text and image selection earlier in the project. Now it's time to put them together and review the layout of your signs exactly as they will appear. Be sure not to skip this often-overlooked but crucial step of proofreading your sign panels before submitting them for production. It's a good idea to call in someone unfamiliar with their content to read through the copy and look at the visuals. An extra pair of eyes may catch errors that have escaped your notice. This is your chance to make last-minute changes. Any changes made later in the production process will be much more expensive.

That brings us to sign fabrication. In Part 2 of this Tech Talk, to appear in the July-August 2008 issue, we'll discuss sign production and review a variety of materials for both signs and frames. We'll also cover some factors to consider before installation. Finally, we'll map out a start-to-finish project timetable.

Ellen Miller, an exhibit developer, and Aaron Novodvorsky, an exhibit project manager, both with the Minnesota Historical Society, have been working in their respective areas of expertise for more than 14 years. They can be reached by email or phone: ellen.miller@mnhs.org or 651-259-3060, and aaron.novodvorsky@mnhs.org or 651-259-3052.

# Minnesota's Sesquicentennial hits high gear

Statewide events mark the year-long observance

May ushers in Minnesota's Statehood Week. One highlight will be a weekend festival on the State Capitol grounds May 17-18. But events commemorating the state's Sesquicentennial are going on all year. Seeded by grants from the Minnesota Sesquicentennial Commission, projects around the state showcase communities from border to border. Here are just a few of them. For more, check the calendar at www.mn150years.org.

*Meeting to plan the Sesquicentennial traveling exhibit of Minnesota's Historic Northwest consortium were (l-r) Ethel Thorlacius (Marshall County), Marlys Hirst (Lake of the Woods), Kathy Pederson (Kittson), Wanda Hoyum (Beltrami), Cindy Adams (Kittson), Tamara Edevold (Clearwater), John Thibert (Red Lake), Charleen Haugen (Roseau) and Dean Vikan (East Polk).*

"Traveling Through Time: 150 Years in Minnesota's Historic Northwest," an exhibit funded by a Sesquicentennial Legacy Grant, will stop at 10 county historical societies in the consortium known as **Minnesota's Historic Northwest**. Each group contributed a photo panel to the exhibit highlighting their county's unique history; one regional panel addresses what they all have in common. The same 150 photos have been published as a book to be sold throughout the area. Proceeds will fund the consortium's future traveling exhibits.

Life in two Ojibwe communities will be told in words and pictures with the help of Legacy grants to the **White Earth Land Recovery Project** and the **Cass County Museum**. A photo exhibit, "Celebrating Change and Resilience," blends family and newspaper photos with the work of photographer John Ratzloff to convey the spirit of the White Earth Nation and its developing model of sustainability. The Cass County Museum will work with the Onigum Local Indian Council to conduct interviews with community elders about life – focusing on schooling, language and traditional ways – at the Leech Lake Agency. The interviews will be published in a book for distribution to Onigum families and to tribal, county and state historical societies.

Another Legacy Grant, awarded jointly to the **Cottonwood County Historical Society**, the Windom Area Chamber of Commerce and Windom's Business, Arts and Recreation Center, will generate community arts projects including a Sesquicentennial quilt and a public sculpture. After a countywide summer tour, the legacy quilt will be installed at the historical society and the sculpture – a metal cottonwood tree whose branches hold framed artwork by area artists – will find a home at the BARC library.

In Blue Earth County, the focus is on oral history as the **Blue Earth County Historical Society** sets its Junior Historians group to work interviewing local residents who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. The project, funded by a Legacy Grant, will seed the society's budding oral history program. Excerpts from the interviews will be played on a local radio station and posted on the website of Voices from the Valley, a group of oral historians; transcripts will be placed in the BECHS archives.

The **McLeod County Historical Society** has planned a year-long series of programs celebrating the many ways the county, its people, communities and businesses have contributed to Minnesota's history. Focusing on ten topics – medicine, agriculture, education, athletics, music and entertainment, the military, art and culture, people, industry and business, and government – the series will culminate in the publication of a history booklet compiled from the library and archives of the McLeod County Museum in Hutchinson.

# Bulletin Board

## Deadlines for state grants-in-aid

Plan ahead for the fall round of state grants-in-aid and state capital project grants-in-aid. Due to the Republican National Convention in downtown St. Paul beginning Aug. 30, it may be difficult getting to the History Center on Aug. 29, the day final applications are due. The deadlines:

**July 25** Pre-application due.
**Aug. 29** Final application due.
**Oct. 3** Grants Review Committee meets.

State grants-in-aid are awarded twice a year in the categories of historic properties, artifact collections, microform copies, oral history, manuscripts collections, museum environments and technology.

Matching grants for historic preservation projects of a capital nature are awarded to county and local jurisdictions once a year. Monies for these grants depend on a bonding appropriation from the Minnesota Legislature. Information on the current legislative session will be posted in the "Local History News" e-newsletter.

For details about the two grant programs, including guidelines, eligibility and application forms, go to www.mnhs.org/about/grants.

## Two more local history workshops remain

You can still sign up for the Spring 2008 round of Local History Services workshops. Two more regional meetings remain, both covering the theme "Systems for success." They are:

**May 9** Grand Marais
**May 19** Warren

Sessions offer a mix of innovative ideas and practical advice on topics designed to strengthen your organization. For more information, see the January-February or March-April 2008 Interpreter. To register for a workshop, call Melinda Hutchinson at 651-259-3459.


### About this publication

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