

# Acquiring Historic Sites *WHAT CRITERIA?*

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WHAT HISTORIC real estate should the Minnesota Historical Society acquire and maintain for a long future? With increasing frequency that question in one form or another is confronting the MHS staff and executive council, the society's governing body.

For background let us trace some of the society's long-time involvement in historic sites. In 1864 Edward D. Neill, the society's unpaid secretary, called for the preservation of Fort Snelling. In 1891 Jacob V. Brower headed a committee of the Minnesota Historical Society which spearheaded the preservation of Itasca as Minnesota's first — and most people would still say finest — state park. During the 1930s MHS archaeologists labored long hours against heavy odds to illuminate the importance of Grand Portage and Fort Ridgely. During the 1940s the society, aided by the strenuous efforts of Judge Clarence R. Magney of Duluth (an MHS executive council member), worked with the United States army, the WPA, and the Minnesota Daughters of the American Revolution to rehabilitate the Fort Snelling Round Tower as a museum. In 1958 the society, again in collaboration with Judge Magney and the Conservation Department, played an important part in congressional establishment of Grand Portage as the state's second national monument.

It was in the same year — 1958, Minnesota's statehood centennial year — that the society ventured into the historical real estate field by accepting the William G. Le Duc House in Hastings as a gift. Other gifts followed in 1959, when Mr. and Mrs. Harry D. Ayer donated the Mille Lacs Indian Museum near Vineland, and in 1961 with the presentation of the 190-acre Oliver H. Kelley Farm near Elk River by the National Grange. During the fourteen years that have followed, other gifts and purchases have brought the society's historic site holdings to twenty-six. Seventeen of these are open to the public. Two aboriginal sites, the Morrison Mounds

in Otter Tail County and the Stumne Mounds in Pine County, are preserved, but there are no plans to open them to public view. Other sites, Grand Mound on the Rainy River, the Harkin-Massopust Store near the Minnesota River, and the Marine Mill site on the St. Croix, are in the process of development.

Ironically, the Le Duc House is still not open to the public because of an agreement with the donor that he have the right to live there for twenty years. That agreement expires in 1978. Another site, the Bourassa Fur Post on Crane Lake, needs additional work on authentication and has been given a low priority. Still another site, Camp Coldwater (actually an adjunct of Fort Snelling), awaits the completion of the main fort's restoration. This fills out the society's holdings of historic sites at present.

IN ACQUIRING historic sites, especially in more recent times, the society has followed two basic criteria — (1) significance of whoever or whatever was associated with the site and (2) integrity in terms of original location and what remains. Another factor is the opportunity provided by the site to tell a hitherto neglected story. Undoubtedly, some of the sites acquired early or during the middle of the program would have difficulty passing muster today. The Comstock House in Moorhead, at best a site of regional significance, probably would not be accepted today. However, such sites became available when the program was young, and the society was struggling to establish a state-wide program. The judgment on the Burbank-Livingston-Griggs House in St. Paul, to take another example, is divided. In terms of history it lacks state-wide significance; yet, judged on its architecture and special rooms, it does well. The W. H. C. Folsom House in Taylors Falls is in the same category. Its story is regional, but its architectural excellence is widely recognized. The Bourassa Fur Post site is

another site that the society may have accepted too fast. Over-all, however, the society's site acquisitions stand up well.

Increasingly, the society has measured its acquisitions against fifteen themes in Minnesota history that the MHS historic sites program should illustrate. In alphabetical order, the themes are: aboriginal cultures (prehistoric), represented by the Grand Mound, the Jeffers Petroglyphs, Morrison Mounds, and Stumme Mounds; aboriginal cultures (historic), represented by Mille Lacs-Kathio Indian sites, the Lower Sioux Agency, and the Upper Sioux Agency; agriculture, represented by the Oliver H. Kelley Farm; architecture (Folsom House and Burbank-Livingston-Griggs House); commerce (Harkin Store, Connor's Fur Post, Bourassa Fur Post, and Fort Renville); education (Minnesota Historical Society Building); immigration; industry (Marine Mill site); literature and arts; medicine (W. W. Mayo House in Le Sueur); military (Fort Snelling and Camp Coldwater, Fort Ridgely, and Le Duc House); natural history; politics and government (State Capitol, Alexander Ramsey House, and Comstock House); religion (Lac qui Parle Mission); and transportation (Charles A. Lindbergh House and Minnehaha Depot).

Many sites exemplify more than one theme. Fort Snelling, for instance, was the origin of several institutions that preceded later institutions associated with the beginnings of Minnesota. It was the site of the first Protestant church, the first hospital, the first theater, the first school, and the first library.

Originally, and as recently as 1963, the society's goal was to acquire, or assist other agencies and organizations in acquiring, sites relating to various aspects of human endeavor in Minnesota. The result was a comprehensive, broadly based program involving both public and private sectors.

But the hard economic facts of historic sites preservation have dictated a major revision in the original program. The hope of preserving most of Minnesota's best historic sites simply cannot be realized. The wisdom of ten years' experience has enlightened us about what the preservation of a public site entails. Some sites are simply too great a drain on resources for their worth in a state-wide sense. In a number of ways, the initial salvaging of a site is the easiest phase in a lengthy process. The ongoing maintenance, interpretation, and operation of a historic site are what become enormously expensive. For this reason, the idea that a large number of sites could be utilized as interpretive laboratories for the teaching of history has also been abandoned. In the future the long list of possible places to be developed will be narrowed so that the focus will be only on those of the highest quality and potential.

EVERY MONTH, if not every week, the society re-

ceives offers to acquire additional historic places. Log cabins are perennial favorites of donors and almost always have to be rejected. Yet there are some sites that should remain high on the society's priority list of "places to acquire." These include Split Rock Lighthouse on the North Shore of Lake Superior where the story of shipping, shipwrecks, and fishing can be interpreted; a pre-statehood village that includes the founding institutions of Minnesota's frontier scene; a French fur trading post that parallels the significance of Grand Portage during the British period; and perhaps others. And we should keep our eye out for a gristmill and even an iron mine.

Nevertheless, the society's acquisition phase is largely over. Its involvement in helping other organizations acquire sites, and in giving technical and monetary aid, has barely begun. It is also certain that in the future the society will invest an increasing percentage of its historic site budget dollars for interpretation and conservation of structures and furnishings.

After seventeen years of experience with acquiring, restoring, and operating historic sites, the Minnesota Historical Society has come a long way toward creating a state historic sites system. I say this in spite of some obvious deficiencies: (1) some themes are over-represented, others not at all; (2) only six of the twenty-six sites are in the seven-county Twin Cities metro area; (3) only one site — the smallest (Minnehaha Depot) — is in Minneapolis; and (4) the MHS site representation is notably weak in the Red River Valley, northern Minnesota, and southeastern Minnesota.

Emerging from the society's involvement with its newest and largest program is the conclusion that the goal of interpreting all major themes in Minnesota history is still valid but that in the future it will move on two parallel tracks: (1) a state-administered, core program to develop the preservation and broad interpretation of sites of major historic importance and (2) a less defined effort at the local level and in the private sector in which zoning laws, historic districts, heritage preservation commissions, and other controls will be employed to preserve what can be called the "historic environment" of a community.

We also should ask ourselves: Are we keeping up-to-date? Does the historic sites program portray eras in which most Minnesotans lived? Most of our historic sites stem from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only the Lindbergh House comes out of the twentieth century. Is there a place in our program for an early twentieth-century mechanized farm? And what of the island home in Rainy Lake of Ernest C. Oberholtzer? He is regarded as the formative influence in the powerful conservation story in northern Minnesota that has developed over the last seven decades. Our tendency has been to leave a gap of several decades between the present and our most recent acquisitions. It is interest-

ing that Minnesota has acquired for public benefit only the homes of its first two governors — Henry H. Sibley and Alexander Ramsey. In a poll of scholars in 1964, Ramsey ranked third and Sibley seventh among Minnesota's governors. The home of Floyd B. Olson, who ranked first, remains in private hands in Minneapolis, and the home of John S. Pillsbury, who finished second, was razed virtually without opposition several years ago on the fringes of the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota.

After a presentation by the director on July 26, the MHS executive committee approved a number of criteria to govern the future acquisition of historic sites and structures by the society:

(1) To be considered for acquisition, a site or building must possess, beyond question, historical associations of lasting significance to the state or nation. Although the application of this bench mark is unavoidably somewhat subjective, this is the criterion to which the society should give greatest weight in determining future site acquisitions.

(2) The site should represent one of the fifteen major themes (already enumerated) that is not presently interpreted by the society's historic sites program, or it should add a significant dimension to the interpretation of an existing theme.

(3) The site must possess integrity. Tangible evidence of factors that gave a site its importance must remain. If a structure, it must be on its original location and must retain large portions of its original character, including authentic atmosphere. If a historic site has been removed from its original physical setting, that circumstance should disqualify it from further consideration.

(4) If a site meets all of the above criteria, it should not be acquired until the society has carefully determined that the financial resources are available to ensure its ongoing maintenance and operation.

In considering future sites for acquisition, the society should consider all of the above criteria together before adding to its real estate holdings.

## MHS COLLECTIONS

# Interpreting Historic Sites

Nancy Eubank

FIFTEEN HISTORIC SITES — the physical reminders of much of Minnesota's past — are now open to the public under the direction of the Minnesota Historical Society's field services, historic sites, and archaeology division. Two other sites — the Minnesota Historical Society Building and the State Capitol in St. Paul — are administered by other MHS divisions, and several other sites are now being developed. Each year some 400,000 persons visit the sites, which are scattered throughout the state.

Much of the work concerned with historic sites goes into restoring, sometimes even rebuilding, structures which have changed drastically since they played their

historic roles. An authentic appearance helps create the historical context within which the men and women who made history at a particular time and place can be better understood.

Once a site is rebuilt or restored, however, its historic significance must be explained in interesting and appealing ways to those who visit it. Traditionally, guided tours, markers, brochures, and souvenir booklets have been used to tell the story at historic sites and other tourist attractions. A more recent innovation is "living history" interpretation featuring staff members performing the tasks and playing the roles of soldiers, fur traders, craftsmen, farmers, and housewives of earlier times. The society uses all of these methods of interpretation at one or more of its sites.

Another relatively new concept in site explanation is the interpretive center, sometimes called the visitors'

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