



# Looking Back:

## *The Minnesota Historical Society, 1992–2010*

Nina M. Archabal with Valerie C. Hauch

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*In 1992 Minnesota History invited Nina Archabal to mark the opening of the new History Center in St. Paul with a thoughtful look at the path that led to that moment. Archabal, the Minnesota Historical Society's deputy director from 1978 to 1986 and director since 1987, was uniquely qualified to reflect on its past and, perhaps, peek at its future. "The New Minnesota History Center: Looking Back at the Journey" appeared in our Fall 1992 issue ([www.mnhs.org/mnhistory](http://www.mnhs.org/mnhistory), Archives, vol. 53, issue 3). Its final paragraph began, "A long journey has ended, and a great adventure begins."*

*Now, at another historic moment, we invited Archabal to assess the first two decades of that great adventure, its significant challenges and accomplishments. Minnesota History is pleased to present the director's words on the eve of her retirement and wishes her the best for the next decades of her active life.*

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“WE CAN’T WAIT to learn more history in your new building.” With these words, students from Southside Family School in Minneapolis voiced their excitement about the new Minnesota History Center at an October 1989 celebration marking the start of construction. For more than a decade, the Minnesota Historical Society had been working to create a new headquarters building that would include a museum, space for educational programs, and centralized public access to its extensive collections.<sup>1</sup> The opening of the History Center in 1992 launched an era of tremendous growth in the Society’s service to the state’s citizens. Underlying the new building’s grand public spaces, galleries, reading rooms, and education wing was

*Enjoying the show at Nine Nights of Music, a weekly summertime event at the Minnesota History Center*

the commitment to becoming more externally focused—bringing history to larger and more diverse audiences. Looking back, the transformation of the state’s history program over the past two decades tells a story of the Minnesota Historical Society’s deepening relationships with Minnesota’s people, schools, and communities.

The Society’s initiative to expand its public service was part of a growing national movement to redefine cultural organizations as educational institutions actively involved in their communities and reflecting America’s diversity. During the 1990s the American Association of Museums called for its constituents to “place education—in the broadest sense of the word—at the center of their public service role,” to include a “broader spectrum of our diverse society in their activities,” and “explore the potential for dynamic engagement” with their communities.<sup>2</sup> The Minnesota Historical Society has

embraced these principles in every aspect of its work.

From the start, the History Center offered Minnesotans unprecedented access to their history. Centralized reference enabled researchers to discover and study items from the Society’s collections in one location. Within a year, public use had more than doubled and would continue to grow. As former Minnesota Historical Society President Marshall Hatfield noted in 1996, improved access attracted a far broader spectrum of users:

Senior citizens and professional scholars who once were a majority

*Nina Archabal recently retired from the Minnesota Historical Society after 33 years of service to the people of Minnesota. Valerie Hauch is a writer and researcher in the director’s office at the Society.*



“We don’t collect and preserve evidence of the past for its own sake. Our collections are information to be shared with the public.”<sup>3</sup>

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of those using our collections in limited spaces now work side by side with high-school students. People who never knew our collections existed discovered for the first time the wealth of information we have collected about their families and communities.<sup>4</sup>

The Society holds a vast collection of Minnesota-related items, and the growth of these holdings in recent years has documented the state’s changing demographics. Collecting

oral history has proved to be an especially effective means of involving recent immigrants in preserving and sharing their history. One of the most poignant moments during the first year of the History Center’s operation came during a ceremony in which members of Minnesota’s Cambodian community presented tapes recording their experiences under the Khmer Rouge and their emigration to the United States. Among the other communities the Society has engaged in oral history are Asian In-

dian, Somali, Tibetan, Hmong, and Latino people who are making their way as some of Minnesota’s newest citizens.<sup>5</sup>

As the revolution in information technology gathered momentum in the 1990s, centralized reference took on new meaning. Great advances in technology fueled ever more access to the Society’s holdings. Information about all areas of the collections became available on the Society’s web site, launched in 1996: books, manuscripts, government records, maps, newspapers, photographs, artwork, video and musical recordings, and three-dimensional objects. The most widely used of these resources are the Minnesota birth- and death-records indexes and the visual resources database, providing information about more than 200,000 photographs and artworks. Digitization has also made rare items far more accessible. For example, visitors to the web site can examine—even spin—an image of the fragile 1765 Delisle Globe, which had been displayed safely, but beyond reach, in the Society’s 2009 exhibition, *Minnesota on the Map*.<sup>6</sup>

Centralized access has expanded beyond the Society’s own collections. In 2006 the Society received a grant from the Bush Foundation to collaborate with historical institutions in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota in developing the Great Rivers Network. From the Minnesota Historical Society’s web site, users may now search and explore the online collections of all network partners.<sup>7</sup>

*Nina Archabal and members of the Society’s Indian Advisory Committee, Mille Lacs Indian Museum, 2010. The committee, which includes representatives of Minnesota’s 11 federally recognized tribes, was established in 1988 to guide the Society’s efforts to tell the story of Minnesota’s native peoples. Back row (from left): Jeff Savage, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Travis Zimmerman, the Society’s Indian affairs liaison, Andy Favorite, White Earth Band of Ojibwe, Kathryn “Jody” Beaulieu, Red Lake Band of Chippewa, Leonard Wabasha, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Front row: Elisse Aune, at-large (Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe), Archabal, Vicky Raske, Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.*



Similarly, the growth of the Society's publications program has brought Minnesota's history to larger numbers of people across the state and beyond. Not only has the Minnesota Historical Society Press significantly increased the number of titles it publishes annually, it has diversified both subject matter and delivery format. Early on, MHS Press recognized the potential of technology to serve its reading audience, and today people everywhere can purchase its books in electronic format from online vendors for download to their e-readers.

Press publications reflect the Society's commitment to preserve and tell the stories of all of Minnesota's people. Over the years, the institution has published many works documenting the history and traditions of the state's Indian people. Among them is Anton Treuer's *Ojibwe in Minnesota*, which the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress named a "Best Read in Minnesota 2010." In *A People's History of the Hmong*, author Paul Hillmer presents stories from some of the state's most recent immigrants. Through these and many other titles, the MHS Press offers readers opportunities to explore the diversity of Minnesota's people, past and present.

While continuing its long-established tradition of scholarly publications in works such as David Martinez's *Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought*, MHS Press also serves general readers through a wide range of books on Minnesota's popular culture and history: Paul Maccabee's *John Dillinger Slept Here*, Cathy Wurzer's *Tales of the Road: Highway 61*, and Doug Ohman's and Will Weaver's *Barns of Minnesota*, to name a only a few. Borealis Books,

the trade imprint of MHS Press, takes Society titles of universal appeal to nationwide markets. Notable among these works is Kevin Kling's *The Dog Says How*, a collection of stories about growing up, traveling, and memorable encounters.

THE MINNESOTA HISTORY Center gave Minnesotans their first major museum for the state's history and, in so doing, redefined the notion of a history museum. The Society's statewide historic sites had proven the power of live interpretation and visitor-centered interactions to engage people with history. The underlying concept of the new museum was that visitors would have both educational and entertaining experiences in exhibitions that connected their lives with those of individuals from the past.

The opening exhibits at the History Center museum offered a broad spectrum of experiences—intellectual, emotional, and sensory. Visitors interacted with history players portraying people from the past, viewed theatrical performances, and participated in hands-on activities. Exhibitions told Minnesota stories through universal human themes including family, community, work, and home.

*Home Place Minnesota* opened in a 50-seat theater at the History Center in 1993. It was the Society's first use of "story theater," a multimedia presentation using sound and music, theatrical design, literature, historical images, and objects to create a powerful emotional effect. After almost two decades, *Home Place Minnesota* remains a favorite for visitors.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the Society has deepened its commitment to work closely with Minnesota's diverse communities, a step that has had a

profound effect on its exhibitions. Notable among these was *Our Gathering Places: African Americans in Minnesota*, which opened in 1998. Members of the community served as advisors to shape the project and as volunteers to bring it to life. Guest curator David Taylor, then dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, led the effort to develop the exhibition. An expert on the migration and settlement of African Americans in Minnesota, Taylor summed up the process this way:

It's impossible to relate almost 200 years of history in 2,500 square feet. . . . The key was not to look at the total experience but at a selection of the contributions of African Americans to Minnesota's social, economic, cultural, and political history. We needed a vehicle that could serve as a lens to look at that collective history, something that cut across the entire community.<sup>9</sup>

After considering various possibilities, the advisors and staff agreed that the exhibition should focus on two important gathering places for the black community: the neighborhood barbershop and beauty salon. Exhibit designers used some of the techniques of story theater to recreate these special places. Thirty community members volunteered to spend time in the gallery to help museum visitors learn firsthand about Minnesota's African Americans, their daily life, and their struggles against prejudice and discrimination. As volunteers John and Leslie Garner of St. Paul said: "People were very excited because it was the first time the History Center had . . . a whole exhibit dedicated to our day-to-day life, how we passed on housing, school or job information through community networks."<sup>10</sup> In 2003,



Volunteer Jim Brown, Our Gathering Places

when the exhibition closed, several of the volunteers continued their involvement with the Society.

In another form of outreach, the Minnesota Historical Society has increasingly asked the public to participate in creating exhibit content. To commemorate the statehood sesquicentennial in 2008, the Society launched *MN150*, an exhibition featuring 150 people, places, things, and events that shaped the state. Two years earlier, exhibit developers used the Society's web site to invite people to submit nominations for *MN150*. Staff members even took the nominating process to the Minnesota State Fair, where visitors could submit their nominations in person. From over 2,700 entries, a committee of staff, community members, and subject experts selected 150 winning nominations that represented a wide range of categories: political figures, pop icons, sports events, inventions, cultural traditions, and many others. The MHS Press also gave voice to the people's choice with *Minnesota 150: The People, Places, and Things that Shape Our State*, authored by exhibition curator Kate Roberts.

In recent years, the History Center museum has extended its reach beyond Minnesota's borders. As today's Minnesotans look to the world in their interests and activities, so, too, has the museum broadened its perspective through exhibitions that transcend the state's geographical boundaries. The popular response to exhibitions such as *The American Presidency* (2005), *The Pulitzer Prize Photographs* (2005–06), *Baseball as America* (2006–07), *Vatican Splendors* (2008–09), and *Ben Franklin: In Search of a Better World* (2009–10) has demonstrated that Minnesotans are eager to explore their relationship not only to their state but also to the wider world.<sup>11</sup>

A **H**ALLMARK of the Minnesota Historical Society's public service during the past two decades has been its expanding outreach to the state's schoolchildren, teachers, and schools. The Whitney and Elizabeth MacMillan Education Center, comprising an entire wing on the second floor of the History Center, serves students from across

the state who come to learn through museum lessons and other activities. In addition, the Society is using video-conferencing technology to enable students to experience live programs at the History Center from their classrooms, interacting with staff members in real time. Students and teachers have responded enthusiastically: "It was pretty cool for not leaving the classroom," reported one Ogilvie sixth-grader, whose teacher concurred: "Students remember so much information because of the interaction; the kids are engaged."

Plans are underway to expand the use of interactive video-conferencing to connect classrooms with the Society's historic sites. Technology will also enhance learning for students visiting *Our Minnesota*, an exhibition that will open at the History Center in late 2012. Students will be able to use mobile devices to collect information, download resources from the Society's online collections, and record their experiences through photos and video clips. Back in their classrooms, they will be able to use this material for projects and perhaps create their own web sites.

A major vehicle for outreach to schools has been the state's first history curriculum, *Northern Lights: The Story of Minnesota's Past*, originally published in 1989. Now in its second edition, *Northern Lights* is used by approximately 70 percent of Minnesota's sixth-grade students. The curriculum, which meets the state's social-studies standards for history, includes a student edition, an annotated teacher's edition, and a classroom resources workbook. Students explore history through hundreds of primary sources, images of artifacts, and first-person stories. Their teachers can rely on the Society



“Dear Forest History Center, Oh my gosh, they have nice trees! Really cool exhibits about logging! Everything is ancient and interesting! I want to show my mom and dad! Someday I might work here! Real things are at the museum!”<sup>13</sup>

for workshops and other support in applying the curriculum.<sup>12</sup>

Since 1987 the Minnesota Historical Society has worked with the University of Minnesota to cosponsor History Day, a social-studies enrichment program. Students in grades six through twelve select a topic related to an annual theme and then produce a research paper, exhibit, documentary, performance, or web site. From 125 students in 1987, all from the Twin Cities, Minnesota’s participation in History Day has grown to 30,000 annually, representing over 200 schools statewide. The Society provides extensive resources for students and teachers, including statewide workshops to assist teachers in incorporating History Day into their curricula. Student projects are judged at regional events, with winners progressing to the statewide contest. State winners are eligible to participate in National History Day in Washington, D.C., where Minnesota students have won many top honors.

The growth of educational programs at the History Center and historic sites over the past two decades, as well as the continuing success of History Day and *Northern Lights*, reflect the Society’s increasing role in educating Minnesota’s schoolchildren. Working with the Minnesota Department of Education to develop standards and resources for the teaching of social studies, the Society continues to expand its service to schools statewide.

WHILE TECHNOLOGY has increased public access to Minnesota’s history, the Society’s 26 statewide historic sites offer unique experiences of history’s real places. New visitor centers at Jeffers Petroglyphs (1999), Historic Forestville (2002), and North West Company Fur Post (2003) offer fresh exhibitions and programs that tell both familiar and new stories. The remodeled visitor center with new exhibitions at the Charles A. Lindbergh House in Little Falls welcomed visitors to the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Lindbergh’s historic trans-Atlantic flight in 2002. Split Rock Lighthouse on

Minnesota’s scenic North Shore celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary in 2010 with special events throughout the year. Interpretive programs at Historic Fort Snelling are expanding to tell a much broader and more inclusive story, ranging from the presence of native peoples in the region for thousands of years to the diversity of those who lived and worked at the nineteenth-century fort—including soldiers, settlers, and slaves—to the generations of enlisted men and women who mustered through the fort until it was decommissioned after World War II.

The Society is currently planning significant new development of



*Students reliving the Fridley tornado of 1965 in the multimedia “Get to the Basement!” experience, Weather Permitting exhibition*



*Mille Lacs Indian Trading post about 1950, when it belonged to the Ayer family*

the Oliver H. Kelley Farm near Elk River. This initiative will extend the site's focus on nineteenth-century farming practices to include opportunities for visitors to learn about twenty-first-century agriculture and food production. Plans call for the expansion of the visitor center and construction of several other smaller buildings. In developing the site, the Society is committed to energy efficiency and using green technologies and other sustainable practices, which are becoming central to all aspects of its work.

In the years since the History Center opened, the Society has developed two new museums: Mille Lacs Indian Museum near Onamia, and Mill City Museum in Minneapolis. Both projects evolved over several years, and the success of each depended on an unprecedented degree of collaboration with local communities.

The Mille Lacs Indian Museum was one of the Society's first historic sites, acquired in 1959 when Harry and Jeannette Ayer, long-time proprietors of a fishing resort and trading post in Vineland, donated 104 acres

of land on the shores of Lake Mille Lacs, the trading post, a cinderblock museum building, and an extraordinary collection of 2,200 Indian objects, mostly representing the Mille Lacs Ojibwe. The next year, the Society opened the museum—with newly installed exhibitions—to the public. Among its most popular attractions was the Four Seasons Room, created with the help of Mille Lacs band members, some of whom were models for life-sized figures depicting traditional Ojibwe seasonal activities.

Over the years, the cinderblock structure deteriorated. In 1983–1984, the Society joined with the Mille Lacs band to plan a new museum and restore the 1930s trading post. Underlying the plan was the conviction that “Members of the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community must play an important role in the interpretation of their own history and culture, because no one can ever know it as well as they themselves.” The plan promised that band members would have access to their material heritage, which the Society held in its collections. The planning committee envisioned a museum that

would reflect the native people's cultural traditions and harmonize with the natural environment.<sup>14</sup>

The new Mille Lacs Indian Museum was completed in May 1996. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Marge Anderson, chief executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, spoke of its significance for her people: “The history of the American Indian has traditionally been told by others—not by us. This museum is *our* record of our history, and for that reason, it tells our story with heartfelt accuracy.”<sup>15</sup> The museum and its programs echo her words. The building's cedar exterior is wrapped with a tile band, replicating an oak-leaf beadwork pattern created by Mille Lacs elder Batiste Sam. Large windows provide views of the lake, which has played a central role in the life of the people. A new exhibition reveals the band's past and continuing presence in the area. In accordance with the wishes of the elders, the refurbished Four Seasons Room is the centerpiece of the museum. Among the building's unique features is a circular room where community members may study the collections the Society holds in trust for them.

Mille Lacs band members play an indispensable role in the museum's operation, interpretation, and public programs. Local people and visitors attend classes and demonstrations to learn about the band's traditional ways, such as harvesting wild rice and making maple sugar, canoes, beadwork, and baskets. The late Maude Kegg, Batiste Sam, and Margaret Hill spent many years, at the old museum and the new one, telling their people's stories and demonstrating Ojibwe crafts. They created a legacy that thrives at the museum today. Joyce Wedll, the museum's first director, conveyed its meaning



for the Mille Lacs Ojibwe with these poignant words: “Like our land and our ancestors, this museum is located in our hearts.” For the Society and for the many visitors who make their way to the museum, it is a place of memory, a place of long tradition, a place of understanding.

The development of Mill City Museum on the Mississippi riverfront in Minneapolis proved to be the most collaborative project the Minnesota Historical Society has ever undertaken. Previously, the Society had not had a significant presence in Minneapolis, but by the 1980s action was clearly needed to preserve and interpret the remarkable concentration of resources located in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District, including two National Historic Landmarks—the Pillsbury A Mill and the Washburn A Mill. These structures, once dynamic symbols of the industrial might of the Upper Midwest when Minneapolis was the flour-milling capital of the world, now stood unused and abandoned.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988 the Society requested authority from the Minnesota legislature to lead an effort to preserve and

interpret the area. The resulting statute created the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone and the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board, composed of high-level officials representing the City of Minneapolis, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Hennepin County Historical Society, Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission, State Historic Preservation Office, and the Minnesota Historical Society. Looking back, Betsy Doermann, Minnesota Historical Society staff member and Heritage Zone coordinator, summed up the need for joint action to save the historic resources: “This was a job far bigger than any one agency could manage.” Sharon Sayles Belton, then a member of the Minneapolis City Council and later Minneapolis mayor, stated the potential of history to spur the economic and recreational development of the riverfront: “We needed a cause, and the cause was the history.”<sup>17</sup>

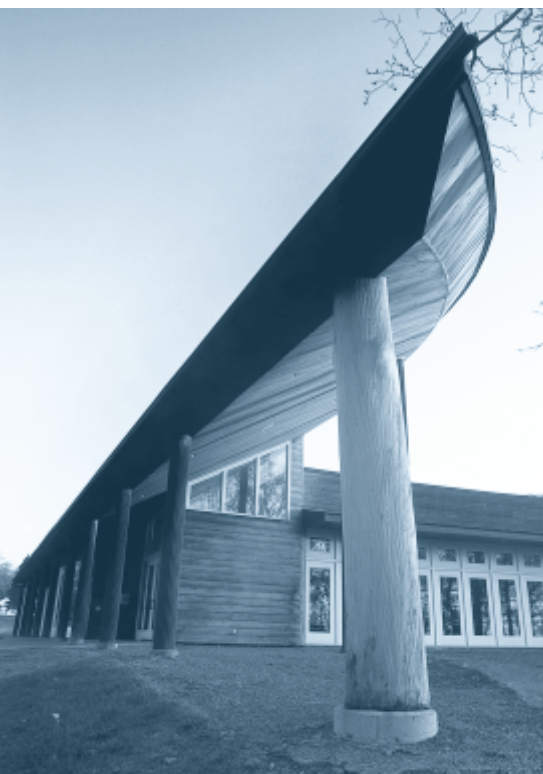
In 1990 the board adopted an interpretive plan to preserve the district’s remaining historic structures. The plan called for the development of a 1.8-mile heritage trail, including the renovation of James J. Hill’s 1883 Stone Arch Bridge for the use of pedestrians and bicyclists, and an orientation center offering information and exhibits about the district’s history.<sup>18</sup> The restored Stone Arch Bridge opened for public use in 1994, followed two years later by the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail. With informational kiosks and way markers, the trail knit together the natural and built landscape of the historic Minneapolis riverfront.

On February 26, 1991, a catastrophic fire all but destroyed the

Washburn A Mill—the world’s largest and most technologically advanced flour mill when it was completed in 1880 by the Washburn Crosby Company, predecessor to General Mills. After the flames died, only the charred limestone walls remained, and they were about to collapse. As the Minneapolis Fire Department prepared to take down the walls with fire hoses, the Society stepped forward to protect the fragile ruins and began to envision a new life for the Washburn A as the place to tell the story of Minneapolis milling and its relationship to the city’s rise to prominence as the region’s economic center.<sup>19</sup>

The project presented an unprecedented challenge: how to preserve and use a historic building that was in ruins. Architect Tom Meyer of Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, Ltd. conceived a brilliant plan that left the stabilized ruin intact as an enclosure for a new museum building. To realize the project, the Society worked with the public sector at every level—federal and state governments, Hennepin County, the City of Minneapolis, and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. Each of these units of government provided administrative and financial support for the development of the museum and the adjacent mill ruins. The building’s eight stories offered far more space than could be used for a museum, however, and so the Society joined with Brighton Development and Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle to develop the site. The museum would occupy the lower three stories, while the upper floors would become commercial office space; ownership of the large structure is distributed among the three entities.

To raise private funds for the new museum, the Minnesota His-



*Cedar-clad exterior of the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum*



torical Society launched a campaign, chaired by its executive council member David Koch, a prominent civic leader and philanthropist.<sup>20</sup> Koch advocated a broader conception for Mill City Museum than the Society had first imagined: It was to be a place worthy of the rich riverfront history, an enhancement to its surrounding community, and an iconic building signaling the Minnesota Historical Society's arrival in the state's largest city.

In September 2003, Mill City Museum opened with 23,000 square feet of exhibition space. Through a blend of hands-on exhibits, multimedia presentations, and costumed characters, it tells the stories of water power and flour milling at St. Anthony Falls and the growth of Minneapolis and the region. The Flour Tower, an eight-story elevator ride, uses the dramatic and engaging techniques of story theater to bring flour milling at the Washburn A to life.

Since its opening, more than 800,000 people have come to the museum to see the exhibitions, participate in school and public programs, and attend the popular *Mill City Live* outdoor summer concerts in the Ruin Courtyard. The museum has attracted national and international recognition, receiving top awards from the American Institute of Architects, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the American Association of Museums. Historian David McCullough called it "a marvelous experience, full of important Minnesota history, great human interest, and surprise. The whole conception, from top to bottom, shows what respect for the past and imagination can do to make history come alive. No one who comes to Minneapolis should miss it."<sup>21</sup>

Mill City Museum has also helped



*Washburn A Mill ruin, enclosing the new Mill City Museum*

stimulate the development of new residential, business, and cultural amenities. It shares its plaza with the new Guthrie Theater, which opened in 2006. Almost half a century earlier, Sir Tyrone Guthrie, renowned British director and the theater's founder, visited Minneapolis for the first time. He predicted the rebirth of the city's riverfront, and his prescient words have proven true through the remarkable collaboration between the Minnesota Historical Society and community, government, and corporate partners.

**D**URING THE LAST two decades, partnerships have become essential to the cause of historic preservation in Minnesota. With ever-increasing effectiveness, the state's 57 heritage

preservation commissions, appointed by local governments, 500 county and local historical organizations, and Indian tribes have played an indispensable role, working with the Society's State Historic Preservation Office to identify and preserve historic resources. The Preservation Alliance of Minnesota is another key partner. Founded in 1981 as a private, nonprofit organization, it is closely aligned with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Drawing upon expanding support, both human and financial, the Alliance cooperates with the Society in advocating for the protection of the state's historic places.

The Minnesota legislature's 2010 passage of the historic-preservation tax credit demonstrates how concerted efforts by preservation

partners can achieve success. This legislation helps owners and developers preserve historic properties through a 20-percent state tax credit for qualified rehabilitation costs. Through the sustained advocacy of a coalition of preservationists, historical organizations, local governments, and developers, Minnesota now joins 30 other states in providing this incentive for preservation.

To fulfill both federal and state mandates, the Society administers the National Register of Historic Places program in Minnesota, which today includes over 1,500 listings representing more than 6,000 properties across the state. The preservation office works to expand Minnesota's awareness of the scope of historic places through National Register nominations that include not only single structures but also districts, bridges, industrial and archaeological sites, and even landscapes. In 2000, Goodhue County's Nansen Agricultural Historic District—46,834 acres, 94 buildings, and 43 additional structures located in the Sogn Valley—was the state's first cultural landscape to achieve National Register status.

Today, the Fort Snelling complex, designated Minnesota's first National Historic Landmark in 1960, remains one of the state's most pressing preservation challenges. Since 1965 the Society has been responsible for preserving the largely reconstructed 1820s historic fort. But there is much more to Fort Snelling, which reaches across Highway 55 to the collection of buildings in the area often referred to as the Upper Post. Here, Officers Row and many other his-

toric buildings stand in a sadly dilapidated state. In 2006 the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Upper Post as one of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places." It is time for Minnesota to preserve and give new life to all of Fort Snelling, a place in the living memories of many who played a role in winning World War II. Their stories are told through the Minnesota's Greatest Generation project, the largest non-building initiative the Society has ever undertaken.

On August 14, 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the Society inaugurated its Minnesota's Greatest Generation project in a public ceremony at the History Center. Drawing on Tom Brokaw's name for the Americans who came of age during the Great Depression and World War II, the Society set out to gather, preserve, and share the stories of Minnesota's own Greatest Generation in order to create a collective portrait its members.<sup>22</sup>

This four-year project embodied the principles that have inspired the Society's work over the course of two decades. Its multiple initiatives—collecting, publishing, oral history, public and educational programs, a major exhibition, and a web site—involved the direct participation of thousands of Minnesotans representing the state's diverse communities. Statewide workshops and events and state-of-the art technology provided the broadest possible access to project components.<sup>23</sup>

Visitors to the Society's Greatest Generation web site can explore WPA art, World War II posters, thousands of historic photos, and

information about events and programs. Minnesotans were also invited to contribute their own Greatest Generation reminiscences through the Share Your Story page. Nearly 1,400 stories have been posted, relating personal experiences of growing up during the Great Depression, war on the battlefield and home front, and life in the postwar era. These stories have been viewed 243,000 times since 2005. The public also participated in the popular *Moving Pictures* annual competition, in which filmmakers—amateur and professional—submitted ten-minute films based on the lives of members of Minnesota's Greatest Generation. Nearly 150 of these were produced and have become part of the Society's collection. Winning entries in various categories were screened at a public film festival in each of the competition's three years.

The capstone to the project, the *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* exhibition, opened on Memorial Day weekend 2009. Its 6,000 square feet of artifacts, recreated environments, and hands-on multimedia allow visitors to experience the vast sweep of American history from the 1920s through the 1960s. The personal stories of a generation come to life, told in the words, voices, and images of its members. In yet another development of story theater, the exhibition includes an experience inside the fuselage of a real C-47 aircraft that transported troops during World War II. The Society's exhibits team restored and fitted the C-47 with sound and sensory systems, transforming its interior into a dramatic setting in which



For an overview of the Minnesota's Greatest Generation project and links to Share Your Story, Moving Pictures, and its other components, visit [www.mnngreatestgeneration.org](http://www.mnngreatestgeneration.org).



“The foundation laid by these men and women, so often called the Greatest Generation, has had a lasting impact on Minnesota, the nation and the world. . . . Before the voices of this generation fall silent, we must capture their stories and preserve them for generations to come.”—Gen. John W. Vessey<sup>25</sup>

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visitors make the D-Day flight from England to the Normandy beaches. The National Endowment for the Humanities designated the exhibition as a prestigious “We The People” project for promoting knowledge and understanding of American history and culture, noting that it “may establish a model for history museums throughout the United States.”<sup>24</sup>



*Terrance Vangen (in coat and tie) and his family pose with a simulated Northwest Airlines plane, Minnesota's Greatest Generation*

INITIATIVES LIKE the Greatest Generation project and the changes that have occurred in many facets of the Society's work over the last 20 years have drawn upon an evolving mix of financial resources. While the largest share

of the Society's budget comes from state appropriations, which have increased significantly since 1992, private support has also grown and is increasingly essential. Membership has grown from approximately 7,500 in 1992 to over 20,000 in 2010, at the same time that the endowment increased from \$4.4 million to \$33 million. As of this writing, the Society has 155 named endowments, with many more promised through estate plans.

In recent years, the pattern of state funding has fluctuated. Since 2002, stresses on the economy have affected the Society and other organizations that rely on appropriations from the state. Generous private support through memberships, gifts, and endowment along with increased admissions and program fees have mitigated the impact of the state's economic problems but have not been sufficient to make up for the losses in state funding. Staff layoffs and reductions in public service have been the unfortunate result.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these difficult circumstances, there is a bright light shining for history in Minnesota. In 2008, voters approved the Legacy Amendment to the state's constitution, which added three-eighths of a percent to the state's sales tax, dedicated to environmental and cultural purposes including funding for Minnesota history. In 2009 the legislature appropriated \$22 million in Legacy funds to the Minnesota Historical

Society for the current biennium. This amount includes significant funding for the Society's efforts to develop new programs serving a statewide audience, as well as funds to be distributed through competitive grants and partnerships with other organizations dedicated to preserving the state's historic resources and telling its story.

In addition to providing substantial operating support for programs, the State of Minnesota has funded the Society's ongoing development of information technology that applies to every aspect of its work. The state also continues to play a major role through capital investment in the construction and maintenance of the museums and the many historic properties in the Society's care.

THE SCHOOLCHILDREN who, over 20 years ago, enthusiastically anticipated learning more history at the new Minnesota History Center have now grown up and perhaps have children of their own who look forward to exploring stories of Minnesota's past. Although the Minnesota Historical Society could not, in 1992, have imagined some of the many ways in which its programs would reach today's technology-savvy people, we knew then, as now, that history is vital to the education of informed citizens and to Minnesota's future. At that time, the Society embraced a vision

of public service shaped by the principles that education must be the central mission, that the state's history should be accessible to all and reflect Minnesota's diversity, and that

history could best be preserved and communicated by working with Minnesota's people. Over the course of two decades, the Society's dedicated governing board members, staff, and

volunteers have acted on these ideas, building a strong foundation for the future as the Minnesota Historical Society stands on the threshold of a new era of service. □

## Notes

1. "Society Celebrates Construction Start," *Minnesota History News*, Nov./Dec. 1989, p. 6; Nina M. Archabal, "The New Minnesota History Center: Looking Back at the Journey," *Minnesota History* 53 (Fall 1992): 116–23.

2. American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992), 7, 8, and Museums and Community Initiative, 1998, [www.aam-us.org/sp/m-and-c.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/sp/m-and-c.cfm).

3. *Minnesota Historical Society Annual Report*, 1990. When the History Center opened, the Society's holdings included 550,000 books, 37,000 maps, 250,000 cataloged photographs, 5,500 artworks, 1,650 oral history interviews, 4.5 million newspaper issues, 38,000 cubic feet of manuscripts, 45,000 cubic feet of government records, 165,000 museum objects, and nearly 800,000 archaeological artifacts; Jack El-Hai, *Minnesota Collects* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992), viii.

4. President's Message, *Minnesota Historical Society Annual Report*, 1996.

5. *Annual Report*, 1993, p. 11. See also Linda A. Cameron, "Common Threads: The Minnesota Immigrant Experience," *Minnesota History* 62 (Fall 2010): 96–106, and [www.mnhs.org/immigration](http://www.mnhs.org/immigration).

6. <http://discussions.mnhs.org/collections/2009/02/delisle-globe-1765/> and select "View 3-D version."

7. For a list of partner organizations, see <http://greatriversnetwork.org/partners.htm>.

8. Michael Mouw and Daniel Spock, "Immersive Media: Creating Theatrical Storytelling Experiences," in *The Digital Museum: A Think Guide*, ed. Herminia Din and Phyllis Hecht (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2007), 50.

9. [www.mnhs.org/places/historycenter/exhibits/gathering/davidtaylor.html](http://www.mnhs.org/places/historycenter/exhibits/gathering/davidtaylor.html).

10. [www.mnhs.org/places/historycenter/exhibits/gathering/garners.html](http://www.mnhs.org/places/historycenter/exhibits/gathering/garners.html).

11. *The American Presidency*, Smithsonian-

ian traveling exhibit; *Capture the Moment: the Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, Newseum traveling exhibit; *Baseball as America*, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum traveling exhibit; *Vatican Splendors*, Vatican Museum traveling exhibit; *Ben Franklin: In Search of a Better World*, redesigned by the Minnesota Historical Society from the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary exhibition.

12. Rhoda R. Gilman, *Northern Lights: The Story of Minnesota's Past* (1989; rev. ed. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003). Revised student edition by Dave Kenney, with investigations by Hillary Wackman and Nancy O'Brien Wagner; annotated teacher's edition and classroom resources workbook by Wackman and Wagner.

13. Kenneth C. Foldoe, a fourth-grader at Bagley Elementary School, quoted in *Minnesota Historical Society Annual Report*, 1994, p. 5.

14. Minnesota Historical Society, "A Concept Plan for the New Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Cultural Center" (1984–85), 6–7.

15. Quotes, here and one paragraph below, in "Preserving Our Culture: New Mille Lacs Indian Museum Is the Talk of the Towns," *The Woodland Voice: A Publication of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe* (Summer 1996): 3, 4.

These elders were treasured friends of the Society and longtime employees at the museum. Batiste Sam and Margaret Hill also served on the Minnesota Historical Society's Honorary Council.

16. The St. Anthony Falls Historic District was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1971; the Pillsbury A Mill was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966 and the Washburn A Mill in 1983.

17. Doermann quoted in Linda Mack, Executive Summary, and Sharon Sayles Belton, interview by Linda Mack, Nov. 17, 2008—both in Minneapolis Riverfront Re-

development Oral History Project, 2008–09, all tapes and transcripts in Minnesota Historical Society. By statute, the director of the Minnesota Historical Society chairs the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board, which grew to include three Hennepin County commissioners, four Minnesota legislators, and three citizen members.

18. Ellerbe Becket, Inc. et al., *St. Anthony Falls Interpretive Plan* (St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board, 1990) and *St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail: An Interpretive Plan: Summary* (St. Anthony Falls Heritage Board, 1990).

19. Nina Archabal, interview by Linda Mack, Jan. 6, 2009, Minneapolis Riverfront Redevelopment Oral History Project.

20. Koch served on the Society's executive council from 1997 to 2009 and as its president from 2004 to 2006.

21. David McCullough, James Ford Bell Memorial Address, University of Minnesota, 2003, quoted with permission.

22. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998); Brian Horrigan, "Pictures From An Exhibition, Lessons From a Generation," *Minnesota History* 61 (Spring 2009), 231. Horrigan was the exhibit curator.

23. Seven books published; several hundred significant objects, books, photos, manuscripts, and over 124 oral history interviews accessioned; "Preserve Your Family History" workshops in all of Minnesota's 87 counties; more than 100 public programs attended by over 40,000 people.

24. National Endowment for the Humanities, 2007 grant evaluation comment, quoted on [www.mnhs.org/people/mngg/about.htm](http://www.mnhs.org/people/mngg/about.htm).

25. Gen. Vessey, retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, served as chairman of the Greatest Generation project.

26. Detailed information on the Society's finances is contained in its annual reports and annual audited financial statements.

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