The POWER of HISTORY

D. Stephen Elliott, CEO and Director, Minnesota Historical Society



Communication speed in 1849, just two long lifetimes ago, was starkly slower than today. There were no telegraphs or railroads to this region, let alone the internet; news traveled at the speed of an ice sled, boat, or horse. If the rivers were neither frozen nor navigable, as when the ice is breaking up in early spring, the faster river routes were forsaken in favor of horses and what passed for roads.

On March 3, 1849, James K. Polk, in one of his last acts as president, signed the legislation creating the Minnesota Territory. (The 53-year-old Polk would die just three months later, most likely from cholera.) Word that the region was no longer part of Wisconsin but a new entity didn't reach St. Paul for five weeks. The steamboat *Dr. Franklin No. 2* completed the final leg of the journey to deliver this historic news on April 9. By September 3, the 27 newly selected members of the territorial legislature convened at the Central House Hotel in St. Paul, where they set about the daunting tasks of creating a new governmental entity and tackling its many start-up challenges. The fifth act of this first legislature was to charter the Minnesota Historical Society.

In nine short years, the territory was succeeded by the state of Minnesota; the state and the Minnesota Historical Society have grown up together. Minnesota's founders were also founders of its historical society. From its inception, MNHS has been the state's principal repository of historic information. The growing institution was located in the state capitol building until 1918, when it moved into a new, dedicated facility flanking the grand State Capitol, completed in 1905.

From the outset, the Minnesota Historical Society not only collected documents and artifacts but also strove to connect the public with its work. Within six weeks of the society's first meeting on November 15, 1849, it held a public program. Within a year, MNHS launched its publishing program with its first book, *Annals of the Minnesota Historical Society*. Thanks to this small volume, the MNHS Press is the state's oldest book publisher.

Thus, a state history organization emerged on a model that differed from that of most other states, a model that consolidated under one entity functions that were often scattered among state and private agencies. Over time, responsibility for the state archives; management of the state's historic sites network; development—with the state's education department—of a Minnesota studies curriculum and publishing the text and curriculum materials with attendant teacher training; administration of historic preservation mandates; field and technical support for Minnesota's hundreds of history and heritage organizations; and grants administration were all consolidated under one umbrella that benefited from both public and private funding. The Minnesota History Center, opened in

Steve Elliott is retiring June 1 after seven years at the helm of MNHS, capping a 45-year career in history and education. Former chair of the field's national association and teacher in a leading graduate program, he's impressed with the field's rising generation of leaders and with the younger professionals coming on board. "The future of history is in good hands," he said.

1992, succeeding the 1918 building that became the state's judicial center, houses collections and a research center as well as an impressive parade of engaging exhibits and public programming. This comprehensive, broadly supported private/public hybrid has emerged to be one of the most successful and highly respected history institutions in the country, with a reputation for excellence and innovation.

I appreciate the opportunity to reflect in the pages of *Minnesota History* (published quarterly since 1915) on the most recent chapter of MNHS's long and distinguished record of service to Minnesotans, as well as to offer broader musings drawn from my 45 years of doing public history.

The first two months of my tenure in 2011 were largely spent working with staff and the governing board on contingency plans for the possibility of a state government shutdown, a situation that, because of the importance of state funding to our programs and operations budget, would affect society operations. After weathering a three-week shutdown and closing a sizable funding gap in the FY12 budget, which required making and implementing painful decisions, we immediately set about looking farther down the road, searching for the point on the horizon that would be our destination.

How does a new director chart a course for such a renowned organization? By listening to and learning from many enthusiastic citizens, members, stakeholders, public officials, donors, educators, historians, and preservationists, not to mention the dedicated staff and an extraordinary and supportive governing board. Under the leadership of my predecessors Nina Archabal and Michael Fox, MNHS earned accolades from across the state and country. What important things should we focus on that would build on more than a century and a half of success?

As we shaped new language around our mission—Using the Power of History to Transform Lives—we asked these key questions to identify priorities:

- Since mission is core, how can we best strengthen our mission delivery? What are the most important things for us to do, how do we do them well, and will they broaden our reach and deepen our impact?
- Whom are we serving and whom can we serve better? How do we make new friends, become meaningful to and valued by more people, and build audiences for the future?
- And, more of a resolve than a question—Let us commit to making decisions with an eye to building our capacity for stewardship and long-term sustainability.

Fundamental to the MNHS mission is collecting. The "stuff" we collect is what distinguishes a historical society from other educational institutions. And we do have a lot of "stuff":

- 2,000 catalogued oral histories
- 6,550 works of art featuring Minnesota, or by Minnesota artists
- 30,000 maps
- 50,156 cubic feet of manuscripts
- 60,000 cubic feet of state archives
- 251,423 artifacts
- 340,285 photographs
- More than 500,000 books, one-third of them not duplicated in other public collections
- 1.25 million archaeological specimens
- 3 million feet of news film
- The largest single collection of Minnesota newspapers
- 69 terabytes of digital records; 64 terabytes of digital newspapers; and approximately 115 terabytes on external hard drives

We take collecting and preserving very seriously, but we also work hard to make our cultural resources as *accessible* as possible. Last year, more than a million visitors came to our 26 museums and sites (including the new visitor facilities at the Oliver Kelley Farm), but our online resources had five million visits by more than 2.5 million people.

And we strive to make our resources *meaningful* to people today, through exhibits, programs, publishing, and partnerships that connect the successes, failures, and stories of those who came before us with the challenges and opportunities that confront us today and will confront our grandchildren tomorrow. Engagement with our constituents is both easy and difficult—easy to imagine and brainstorm, but difficult to execute well and consistently. Engagement is energizing, and it can be contentious. But these interactions make the rest of our work—collecting, preserving, sustaining—worthwhile.

The fascinating and essential quality of history is that it provides the context for the world we live in. As William Faulkner famously wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Nineteenth-century French poet and politician Alphonse de Lamartine went Faulkner one better. "History," he wrote, "teaches everything, even the future."

Sometimes folks are frustrated that the familiar narratives they learned in school—narratives they use to make sense of what they know—have evolved or been superseded. How and why does this happen?

Research may uncover new sources that in turn offer up new information. The public, and subsequent genera-

tions of historians, ask different questions and view data through new lenses. Since the middle of the twentieth century we have moved from consensus history, which emphasized unity and downplayed conflict, and a focus on great men, to mining data about everyday people to undergird a "new" social history, yielding an increased understanding of power structures and previously marginalized groups.

At MNHS we have worked hard to portray a more comprehensive and inclusive history. We strive to convey the richness, complexity, and sometimes sordidness of the past, introducing the public to primary sources and engaging them with multiple perspectives. We work with community partners to entice a sense of discovery and connectedness, breaking down compartmentalization within the period or subject and relating the relevance of the history to our world and lives today. We don't try to cover all the ground or provide all the answers, but we hope to pique the interest of those with whom we interact so that when they move on from their experience with us, they continue asking questions and seeking out new information and answers.

We have shifted from being *the* source of authority to sharing authority, from presenting single narratives as "the truth" to intertwining stories that are themselves evolving. As scholars and independent researchers produce new findings, we are most often the interpreters for the public, which can create contention in a world where everyone has his or her favorite facts, political perspective, and access to social media.

Sometimes being in the crosshairs has been uncomfortable for those of us trained as historians, but if we are engaging the public in viewing history as the context for today and tomorrow, we need to relish and exploit the opportunity it affords for education and for honest exchange.

Minnesotans have seen this approach in MNHS's work for some time, but I think it is especially evident in our initiative to revitalize Historic Fort Snelling, which contains Minnesota's oldest extant structures and is Minnesota's first National Historic Landmark. Our goal at Fort Snelling, as it approaches its bicentennial in 2020, is twofold. First, we aspire to extend chronologically the history we tell, beginning with the recession of the waterfall upriver from what is now St. Paul to present-day Minneapolis, and to convey that human history at the site extends back more than 10,000 years. This is Bdote, Dakota homeland and sacred space, a site of one of the Dakota's origin stories. We are expanding the length and breadth of the history we tell by extending the site's story into the mid-twentieth century and by sharing stories from diverse perspectives.

We have shifted from being *the* source of authority to sharing authority.

MNHS staff is engaging with communities to develop new programming around Native Americans, enslaved and free African Americans, and military history beyond the 1820s. We will talk about Minnesotans' important contributions to the Union army and about the US–Dakota War without waiting for milestone anniversaries. We'll include stories of the segregated, all–African American Twenty-fifth Infantry, the "Buffalo soldiers," who were stationed at Fort Snelling in the 1880s; those who served in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars; and those who fought in both world wars, including a story we have already begun to tell, of the Japanese American soldiers who served in US military intelligence at Fort Snelling during World War II while many of their families were in western internment campus. We will honor the service of hundreds of thousands of veterans, and the sacrifices of their families, over nearly a century and a half.

The other component of our initiative is a once-in-more-than-a-generation upgrade of the visitor facilities at Historic Fort Snelling, stepping away from a dated forty-year-old underground facility with chronic maintenance issues to instead greet visitors from within repurposed historic structures—structures we are charged to preserve but that are currently mothballed. The best way to preserve a building is to use it.

The history of Fort Snelling presents opportunities to inform our discussion of major narratives in American history: the yearning for and defense of freedom; our journey to identify and protect human rights; and the struggle for sovereignty and power. It's a fitting venue for consideration of these perennial themes.

It is more important than ever that we steep ourselves in each other's stories and the stories of our ancestors. Our ancestors' stories provide context for today; listening to each other's stories is prerequisite for having meaningful dialogue and building relationships.

This is essential work that we do.

I am reminded of one of our late trustees, a senior executive of Cargill. For much of his career, he traveled the world, forging business deals involving crops and



Fort Snelling at Bdote, Dakota homeland, is a fitting venue for consideration of major narratives in American history. (LEO A DALY AND TEN × TEN)

food with partners and customers abroad. After a very productive trip to a South American country, a colleague marveled at the success of their first visit and David's ready ability to get along. How did he do it? David shared that he always read up on a country's history—including people's stories and the "hows and whys" of the country's culture—before arriving. This curiosity and preparation, coupled with a healthy respect for people and a willingness to listen, helped to lower barriers and nurture working relationships.

The importance of knowing each other's stories has only grown as communication advances have made the world more interconnected than ever. When merchant and politician William Henry Carman Folsom came to Wisconsin Territory from Maine in 1836 at age 19, his trip took 30 days. When he went back to Maine to visit at age 69, he observed that the return trip took just three days. Matthew Brady was able to display photographs of the Antietam battlefield in his New York studio just a few weeks after the battle, making vivid the horrors of the Civil War in record time.

Think of how subsequent communication technologies—the radio and the telephone—continued to bring us closer. War was broadcast into American homes almost *live* during the Vietnam War. Today—with the internet, social media, and cell phones equipped with cameras and Wi-Fi connections—continents, nations, countries, and tribes everywhere are in virtual immediate proximity. Every hour of every day we can see and interact in real time with what is happening *now* on the other side of the world.

As we bump into each other without the cushion of space and time, reactions happen faster and faster, along with the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. It is crucial that we improve our capacity to get along—and that starts with a willingness to understand who, individually and collectively, we are, and why we are like we are, which in turn can help us respect our differences rather than have our differences propel us to conflict.

To appreciate who others are and where they're coming from, it's important to listen to each other's stories. Like technology, the stories of those who came before us can bring us closer. All of us who love history are the keepers and tellers of those stories.

By using the power of history to transform lives, we build understanding, empathy, and relationships, transforming how we as people relate to each other. Imagine directing our collective energy toward clean water, adequate food, accessible health care, good education, and conservation of the planet upon which every one of us depends for life. We could move from hostile coexistence to peaceful and collaborative coexistence.

Oh, what stories we could tell then, to grandchildren whose future is assured! ▣



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: **contact us**.

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, **contact us**. Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. **Contact us** for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see **MHS Library FAQ**.