

Explorations in Place and Time—

When asked to chair the 2012 Annual Meeting Program Committee Salt Lake City, I held the position of State Historic Preservation Officer and Director of Historical Resources for the State of Florida. Florida is a place that is very different from the Vermont described below, but a place, like Vermont, that is rich in natural beauty, diverse cultural landscapes, distinctive historic sites, and powerful human voices and stories.

Shortly after arriving in Tallahassee, one place particularly captivated my heart, mind, and spirit. Known as The Grove, this place sits on ten oasis-like acres in the heart of Tallahassee, Florida's capital city, and served as home for two of its governors. Charged with transforming this place into a public museum, the question facing our organization was: what would this place become? Do we create a historic house museum, embrace living history, fill the place with exhibits and displays, or do we create something else? As you will read below, and undoubtedly know from your own work, these are not new questions. The only differences are the places being considered.

It was at this moment that, perhaps for the first time, I really began to think about "place" in the broadest possible sense. I thought about place in a way unencumbered by physical, intellectual, and/or chronological boundaries. I thought about places of importance to me, why they were important, and how this value manifested itself in my life and work. And, I thought a lot about The Grove as a place rich in history, stories, and the context of the past. More importantly, I began to think about The Grove's true and authentic wealth as deriving from its place as more than a museum destination, but as a starting point for personal and communal journeys in which the historical context of a place is used to foster, facilitate, and nurture something bigger, something more powerful, and something more meaningful than a singular understanding of the past.

A Personal Journey

BY DAVID A. DONATH

Strawbery Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Much of the inspiration for this new way of understanding and exploring place originated and developed through conversations and interactions with David A. Donath. And as I learned more about Salt Lake City itself, a theme bubbled to the surface that connected the city's history with the needs of history organizations and their paid and unpaid staff—*Crossroads: Exploring the Vibrant Connections Between People and Place*. This theme focused so specifically on connections between people and place that I immediately thought of David to provide significant insight into our personal and organizational relationships with *place* and *places*.

The following article, although introduced as a personal journey, offers much more. David's expression of his own experiences offers a thoughtful reflection and analysis about topics and issues of great importance to our communities, our institutions, and our places. In so doing, he provides a powerful example of an individual's and several organizations' inspiring efforts to not only preserve places and teach history, but to change the world and *lift the human spirit* through deeper connections with place. This example continues offering personal inspiration, and profoundly informs my work in my new position as Executive Director of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

I encourage you to also consider its meaning and applications for you and your organizations, and I look forward to seeing you all in Salt Lake City or in its concurrent online conference. (www.aaslh.org/am2012)

—SCOTT MUIR STROH III
2012 Annual Meeting Program Chair

Guided by the theme *Crossroads: Exploring the Vibrant Connections Between People and Place*, AASLH will focus on the personal, communal, and organizational journeys that lead to vibrancy, authenticity, health, and happiness, and how these journeys allow us to achieve meaningful and impactful social change.

With the inspiration of Salt Lake City as our setting, consider the meaning of place in your personal life. What are your special places? Why are these connections meaningful? How do they support and sustain you as an individual and your work in the field of history? Furthermore, think about your organization. Is it representative of the values and distinctiveness of your place; and how are these connections represented? Are they fundamental to your institution? Consider your community: how is its story connected to your organization? Is this relationship mutually sustainable and beneficial? What is changing or should change? How can you and your organization support and inform your community?

As you embrace these concepts, think again about Utah. Think about meaningful social change and think about making a difference through the medium of people, place, and history. Most importantly, think about the future of these connections, those between people and place and those between our organizations and our communities, and think about opportunities for us all to guide our own futures through people and place. (Excerpted from *Crossroads: Exploring the Vibrant Connections Between People and Place* www.aaslh.org/am2012.)

If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.

—WENDELL BERRY QUOTED BY WALLACE STEGNER (1992)

Like Wallace Stegner before him, Wendell Berry is a leading voice among our great environmental writers. Berry primarily was talking about understanding our places in nature. But I apply Berry's observation also to understanding our places in time—to knowing where we are in history as well as on the ground. These concepts are core to our work in the field of state and local history. They are also core to our roles as citizens in our communities, our personal identities, and our human wellbeing.

To develop and function as healthy human beings and citizens, we need to be grounded in place and time. We need to appreciate where we are, where we have come from, and how we got here. Our identities depend on our ability to navigate time and place. Our productive roles as members of communities and of society as a whole depend on our working sense of our place in the world and in its historical processes.

These needs also apply to communities and governments. To be healthy, they need perspective. In the history field we call this context, meaning perspective on our locales and their relationships to past and present. Former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously quipped, "All politics is local." He understood that over time our community relationships form the roots both of politics and of culture. These are all good reasons why we should care about something we call local history.

As I reflect on a thirty-year career in the vineyard of history, I see my personal journey as a quest for identity and context. Enticed by the chestnuts of civics and American history that I learned in public school, I was drawn deeper into understanding my place in nature, geography, and time. Initially groomed to be an engineer, I chose to study history instead. Eschewing the political and economic history that



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seemed fashionable in my graduate seminars, I chose historical geography and its social and cultural corollaries. Most of all, I was interested

in the stories we tell that help us to understand our places in geography, society, and history, the stories that lend our places authenticity. About the time I completed my A.B.D. (all but dissertation), I fled the academy for the real and tangible world of historic preservation, then to the field of historic sites and outdoor museums. I never looked back, but I never stopped studying, learning, and searching.

I left the classroom during the heady time of the Bicentennial celebration. Despite the national traumas of failure in Vietnam and presidential disgrace, popular fascination with American history was at high tide. I wanted to embrace and immerse myself in the life of the past, to present it to a public that shared my hunger for historical enlightenment. After a brief sojourn in the Wisconsin state historic preservation office, I directed one of the state's historic sites, then its array of six sites scattered around the state. The New Social History and related notions of period authenticity formed our gold standards as we revised our sites according to careful material culture research maintained seamlessly through restorations, furnishing plans, and interpretive scripts. We corrected our sites' tired Eisenhower-era presentations, finding them all too often phony-colonialized, triumphalist conflations of the American story. We sought authenticity by perfecting accurate social history time capsules that we believed would have the power to transport our visitors into past lives and places through the miracle of living history. We were righteous iconoclasts and passionate storytellers in our own rights, but I confess that after a few years of this I grew restless. A decade later I would give a talk at an Association for Living History Farms and Museums conference entitled "Is There Life After Living History?"

I moved on to an outdoor museum that addressed four centuries of history of a single place—an ancient neighborhood on the New Hampshire Seacoast. The Strawberry Banke Museum was experimenting with a range of approaches to interpreting place over time. Taking inspiration from the neighborhood's rich layering of architecture, artifacts, and stories, the Banke sought authenticity in its complexity and anachronisms. Forget the historical time capsule. In the Puddle Dock neighborhood four centuries of change lay side by side and juxtaposed, one on top of the other, often with multiple generations revealed in the same historic building. Imagine a late-eighteenth-century merchant mariner's residence with its east half restored to the 1790s era of Captain Shapley, and its west half restored to the 1950s era of its working-class tenants. And next door, the post-medieval 1690s house of John and Elizabeth Sherburne dissected as an architectural artifact; or a 1720s house restored to its 1940s form as the neighborhood's mom-and-pop Abbott Store—all in the same historic neighborhood, little more than a block apart.

At first blush, Strawberry Banke seemed to verge on historic sites heresy. By our earlier lights, we'd assumed that our visitors could be hopelessly confused by the depiction of multiple periods and themes all assembled chock-a-block on a single site. Rather than a neat historical time capsule, had the Banke assembled a Tralfamadorian mélange where Billy Pilgrim indeed had come unstuck in time and ambled the streets of Puddle Dock? But our visitors weren't perplexed, they were intrigued, and they navigated our anachronisms with amazing adroitness. Rather than seeking chronological timelines, some found the past easier to approach from the vantage of the present—from finish to start, so to speak. People who might have hated history in the classroom loved discovering it on the ground, as it offered new avenues toward understanding a place over time. We saw that many understood history as generational rather than chronological. Grandparents could show their grandchildren places of their own pasts alongside places depicting other periods, and then they might leap back another century and recall the pasts of their own grandparents or great-grandparents.

Strawberry Banke's profound strength lay in its stratigraphy of multiple generations all encapsulated in a single compact neighborhood. Layer upon layer, generations of people of multiple callings, ethnicities, and circumstances had laid down the evidence of their lives in this single place. Layer upon layer, we were picking it apart so visitors could explore it, hear its stories, and gain insights into their own pasts and their own places. Asked what they thought was best about the experience, many answered, "Its authenticity."

But today, many historic sites and outdoor museums are troubled. While Strawberry Banke, Old World Wisconsin, and many others remain interpretively rich, they face severe financial challenges. Critics argue that America has too many historic house museums. The impulses that created them have shifted, their audiences are slipping away, and

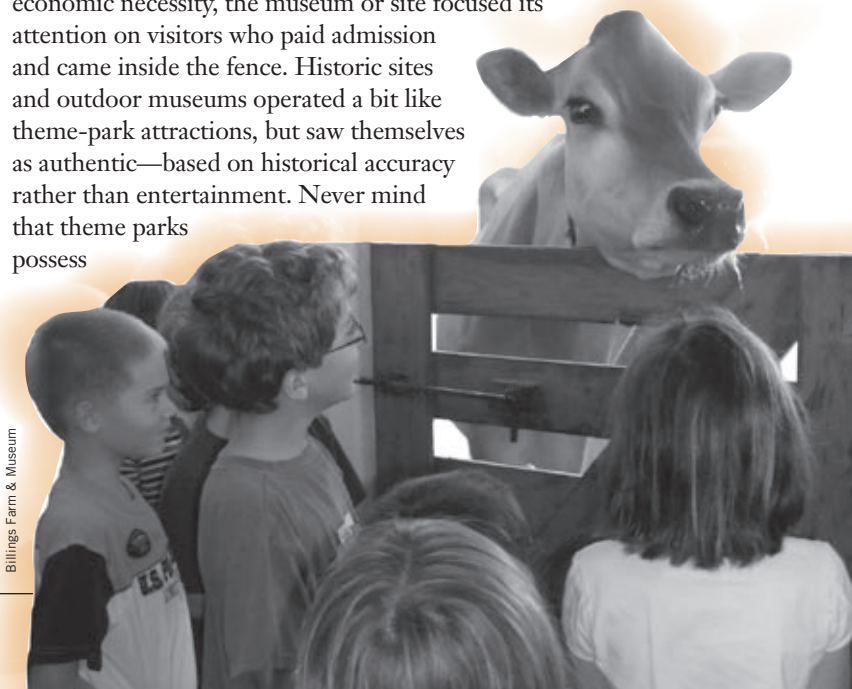


Strawberry Banke Museum's Abbott Store, interpreted to World War II era.

only the strongest of them may prove sustainable long into the future. Even the strong are struggling.

Undoubtedly there's some truth in these critiques. Most of these places developed during the post-World War II era of prosperity, a time when the automobile dominated American vacations and entertainment. Historic sites and outdoor museums often grew up as roadside attractions, complete with convenient parking lots, clean restrooms, ubiquitous gift shops, and perimeter fences. Fences were essential to define the bounds of the site, the historic zone, or the time capsule. Also, fences controlled access, limiting entry to only those visitors who bought an admission ticket. Success (or failure) thus became measured by increasing (or declining) ticket sales, and the show inside the fence defined the program. At Strawberry Banke, continually mending and painting an in-town fence proved a major effort and expense while interpretive staff members daily grew frustrated by gatecrashers. At the same time, I've heard staff from fenceless outdoor museums bemoan the unticketed masses that invade the *sancta sanctorum*, interested only in a quick snapshot, a visit to the restroom, and perhaps a trinket from the gift shop.

Automobile-borne visitors engaged this new kind of museum randomly, on vacations rather than regularly. Out of economic necessity, the museum or site focused its attention on visitors who paid admission and came inside the fence. Historic sites and outdoor museums operated a bit like theme-park attractions, but saw themselves as authentic—based on historical accuracy rather than entertainment. Never mind that theme parks possess



Above left: Strawberry Banke Museum's Sherburne House circa 1695. Right: Daily farm programs for schools and the traveling public feature "up-close" interaction with the farm's livestock.

their own brands of authenticity, sometimes even rooted in popular history, and that other businesses increasingly brand themselves as forms of entertainment, themed and engaging customers in authentic experience. Today, historic sites indeed face challenges as they must produce and most importantly sustain an expensive product while they increasingly lack the ability effectively to differentiate themselves from encroaching competition. Audiences move on while costs relentlessly grow out of reach. Too often, the time capsule or the fenced historic zone simply can't compete.

After a fairly brief sojourn at Strawberry Banke, I returned to my home state of Vermont to lead the development of a new outdoor museum in Woodstock. I went to the Billings Farm & Museum in 1985 at the start of its third operating season, and I've been there ever since. Billings incorporates an operating 140-year-old dairy farm as well as conventional historical museum exhibits, a living-history restoration, and an active film program. And yes, it has a fence, it sells admission tickets, and I confess to sometimes opening board meetings with reports on how its attendance is doing. But Billings Farm also has a full-scale farm operation that its visitors see and touch, a lively array of historical programs and activities, and an engaged audience and membership with a high rate of repeat visitation (members average five visits per year). Billings Farm also helped to create Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, which is Vermont's sole unit of the National Park System. The Farm's parent institution, the nonprofit Woodstock Foundation, also owns a separately governed for-profit subsidiary, the Woodstock Inn, a four-diamond resort that includes a spa, ski areas, a golf course, and other recreational facilities. Together, the Farm, Park, and Resort help to anchor the community of Woodstock environmentally, aesthetically, historically, recreationally, and economically as an internationally renowned destination. Taken together, the Woodstock Foundation and its combination of sister entities indeed are all about place.

In the mid-1990s, at the time that plans for Woodstock's national park were taking shape, then-Acting Director Denis Galvin challenged the National Park Service to look beyond its individual park boundaries. He called for "connecting the dots," developing linkages between parks and their neighbors, communities, and museums. Historical, cultural, and environmental context resided outside of park boundaries in the "connective tissue" that lay beyond, and parks would not fully achieve their programmatic potential until they engaged it. At Billings we'd always espoused a collaborative attitude, seeing our place as part of a web of kindred places across Vermont and beyond. We didn't think in terms of competition with these other places, but in the interest of ticket sales, we did keep our fences mended.

Billings Farm had originally set forth its interpretive mission as exploration of the rural, agricultural life of east-central Vermont in the century after the Civil War. This was a time frame that coincided with the history of the farm itself, originally a nineteenth-century gentleman's estate that had evolved as a modern operation. The Billings Farm & Museum presented anachronism, with its modern evolved gentleman's farm juxtaposed against an exhibit about Vermont's hill-farming families whose operations were at the



Visitors can experience horsepower firsthand, while maneuvering a walking plow behind Billings Farm's Percheron team.

opposite end of the social scale. By the 1980s, farm life had itself become exotic, and the museum was able to gloss over social and technological distinctions in favor of an interpretation that simply celebrated farm life and farm work. Within a decade it added a restoration that illuminated the gentleman's farm of a century past, depicting a social counterpoint to its hill-farm contemporaries while it explored the historical origins of the modern farm. But was Billings Farm fully addressing its mission of interpreting Vermont's rural life and work?

We said so at the time. In 2002 we inserted an epigram on the back of our holiday greeting card dubbing Billings Farm the "Gateway to Vermont's Rural Heritage." We thought this slogan justifiable. After all, nobody else claimed such a distinction. A few of our longtime Vermont colleagues raised their eyebrows. "What makes you so special?" they asked. The following summer, Billings celebrated its twentieth anniversary as an outdoor museum. We invited Vermont Governor Jim Douglas to give the keynote. We encouraged him to speak about agriculture, always a good topic in Vermont, and we hoped he might mention Billings Farm's role as a rural heritage gateway. He said, "If farming is to have a future in this state, indeed if Vermont is to have a future with farms, the Billings Farm & Museum will help to lead the way. As a gateway to our rural heritage it shows thousands of visitors and students every year where rural Vermont has come from and why it is so important.... It shows how generations interact with the places they inhabit and the places from which they draw their sustenance, how generations can care for the places they pass on to their children. In so many ways the Billings Farm represents the best of Vermont past, present, and future."

But what did this really mean for the presentation of the Billings Farm? What indeed? Our program was inside the fence, but our context, our real subject matter lay outside, in the living farm countryside all around us. As we embraced our gateway identity, opportunities emerged that we might not otherwise have recognized.

In 2004 the National Geographic Society's *Traveler* magazine published its list of 115 of the world's greatest destinations, ranked by their attractiveness and integrity. Vermont scored in fifth place, high among the world's great, unspoiled destinations. This world-class ranking surpassed that

of any other location in the United States, as well as most of the truly famous destinations on the planet. Vermonters were astonished. “What made us so special?” But astonishment, pride, and euphoria grew laced with hints of dread. What did it really mean to be a world-class destination? Did Vermonters really want to become the objects of mass tourism? Maybe Vermont could make money on this somehow, but could it protect itself from the big developments that might spoil our cherished place? Good questions all.

We went back to our friend Governor Douglas and we proposed a conference on the issue. He agreed and in 2005 the Billings Farm and the Woodstock Inn hosted the Governor’s Summit on the Vermont Destination. On the table were the issues of opportunity and threat inherent in Vermont’s world-class destination status. Around the table were thirty-eight of Vermont’s most effective leaders: entrepreneurs, educators, tourism operators, preservationists, museum people, artists, conservationists, legislators, and government officials. Two days of provocative, sometimes intense deliberations produced a statement of core values and a report. These in turn have informed discussion and policymaking about Vermont’s future ever since, and the story continues to unfold.

Billings Farm had entered a new arena. No longer just an outdoor museum delivering a program inside the fence, it had engaged the countryside beyond—its own geographical and historical context. It had also entered the realms of advocacy and policymaking. Doing so lay well within the mission of the Woodstock Foundation, but what were the implications for the Farm & Museum? What did the gateway role really imply? Where did museum interpretation end and advocacy begin, and did that matter? What did these things imply for our relationships around the state? What about our audiences? How might this change visitor experiences? How might we engage them? How might this enrich them? Not to be forgotten—would our visitors still be willing to pay admission and come inside the fence?

For the Woodstock Foundation, its new role seemed to reinforce its mission, vision, and place in the larger community. Its mission—“to promote conservation, sustainable land use, and heritage as values that are essential to culture, community, and the human spirit”—stemmed from the philosophy of its founder Laurance S. Rockefeller who believed that places possessing a strong combination of natural beauty, environmental quality, heritage, culture, recreational opportunity, and civic vitality *had the power to lift the human spirit*. This mirrored National Geographic’s criteria for great, unspoiled destinations, which grew from its Center for Sustainable Tourism’s definition of Geotourism, “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographic character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.” Altogether, these definitions echoed Vermont’s own brand identity as “a place that conveyed a profound sense of well-being.”

We had a great fit. How would it sugar off into the interpretation, exhibits, and programs of the Billings Farm & Museum? What stories would we tell? What would make this authentic for the lives of our visitors? We took our ideas to the National Endowment for the Humanities where we

found program officers who shared our enthusiasm for the potential of an outdoor museum program extended outside its fence. We applied for and received consultation and planning grants from National Endowment for the Humanities, which enabled us first to take our staff on the road to explore other potential gateway sites across the country and then to assemble scholars and practitioners to help us think through our own potential. We began to conceive of the museum both as a rich on-site experience and as a portal for experiencing its surrounding countryside. Quite different from a time capsule, we began to think of our place as an air lock or a decompression chamber. Our aim became to use our on-site experience to inspire visitors to explore the countryside outside of the fence, to delve deeply into the working landscape, its history, and its culture.

Vermonters, wary of the impact of mass tourism on their state, warmed to the idea of a place where visitors might be inspired to appreciate the state’s fragile working landscape and to use it sensitively. They liked the idea that through deep exploration of the Vermont countryside, existing tourists might spend more time there, leading to more tourism revenue, increasing “heads in beds” without adding hordes of new tourists. Vermonters themselves appreciated Billings Farm as a place where they and their families could learn about their cherished home state, taking heightened sensitivity back to their individual home places. At Billings, residents and tourists alike would find inspiration toward broader explorations of Vermont, deepening their experiences and their appreciation of this authentic place—a real place in nature and in history. And through appreciation, ideally their spirits would be lifted and they would grow in their sense of stewardship.

Like most big undertakings, ours remains a work in progress. We continue to raise more questions than we can answer. But we are grounded in our place, both spatially and in time. Knowing where we are helps us to know who we are, and, where we may be heading. ●

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