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Building a Better Village: Connecting Cultural Institutions through Historical Research

By James A. Schnur

ibraries, museums, and other cultural institutions have made great strides in reaching nearby and distant patrons with excellent collections and exhibits. Digitization efforts and the Internet have expanded opportunities to share resources and to showcase holdings far beyond the physical confines of the institution. However, the "mad rush" towards digitization has led to new problems for cultural institutions at the same time these facilities face increasing demands by their patrons for free, instantaneous access to greater amounts of information. This matter becomes more complicated when some items have uncertain ownership, pedigree, provenance, or copyright. Though curators can easily replace an improperly labeled item in a glass display case, many cultural institutions broadly disseminate electronic books, historical documents, virtual exhibits, and similar resources that include historically inaccurate or outdated information. Few cultural institutions have the resources necessary to check all documents for accuracy or to create digitized errata Web pages for historically significant yet controversial or inaccurate sources.[1]

A recent grant in Pinellas County allowed an open-air historical museum to build scholarly resources that described its significant structures. Librarians, historians, genealogists, and many volunteers representing a variety of cultural institutions participated in this research project. While information uncovered will allow the museum to revise and improve the quality of its exhibits and interpretive plans, the grant also created a scholarly foundation that will improve understanding of the social history of the Pinellas Peninsula. Challenges encountered and lessons learned during this project may provide guidance for other cultural institutions engaged in similar research.

Overview of Heritage Village

Heritage Village occupies a twenty-one acre site in central Pinellas County. Along with the neighboring Florida Botanical Gardens and Gulf Coast Museum of Art, this popular venue serves as an important anchor of the Pinewood Cultural Park complex. Originally known as "Heritage Park," this historical village grew out of efforts during the early 1970s to commemorate the American Bicentennial and to preserve threatened structures. The facility opened to the public in 1977. Since its beginnings, workers have moved

or reconstructed nearly thirty structures at this location. Funded by the Board of County Commissioners, Heritage Village benefits from the guidance of advisory bodies such as the Pinellas County Historical Commission and the support of non-profit cultural organizations, including the Pinellas County Historical Society. During the summer of 1995, officials changed the name of "Heritage Park" to "Heritage Village" to emphasize the difference between a traditional *park* with picnic benches and playgrounds and a *village* that preserves important historical structures.

Controversy followed the creation of Heritage Village. In the mid-1970s, some public officials became angry when four large moving vans transported archival and museum collections from the basement of the Pinellas County Courthouse in downtown Clearwater to a new secure, climate-controlled repository surrounded by pine trees. They demanded that these collections stay in Clearwater — the seat of government for Pinellas County — rather than at a building nestled in the remote palmetto scrub. Also, many preservationists preferred that historic structures remain on their original site and therefore condemned the relocation of buildings. During its early years, one preservationist lambasted Heritage Village as representing nothing more than a "zoo for buildings." In a county with few natives, where residents knew little about the history of the Pinellas Peninsula, staff had to fight against the common assumption that many citizens held during the 1970s: "If it's old, tear it down." The success of Heritage Village thus required a strong emphasis on public education and assistance from other cultural organizations.[2]

Grant Proposal

Jan Luth, director of Heritage Village, submitted an ambitious grant proposal to the Florida Humanities Council in 2002. She sought funding for humanities scholars to evaluate the present archival holdings related to the history of structures at the museum, to compile accurate information about their owners and occupants, and to research and create narratives that explored the area's history through these structures. She based her grant proposal on the mission of Heritage Village, namely "to collect, preserve, and interpret the history of Pinellas County in the context of Florida history." The Florida Humanities Council awarded a grant entitled *Pinellas County Stories Revealed through Heritage Village* in late 2002. The timeline for the grant covered the period from February 2003 until January 2004.[3]

Through this grant, two humanities scholars — a librarian and an architectural historian — worked with staff, docents, genealogists, academicians, and others who volunteered their services as members of a research "dream team." Each of the scholars examined materials located at the Heritage Village Library and Archives, conducted interviews with individuals familiar with the buildings, and consulted other repositories for additional information. Three obstacles soon challenged the researchers involved in this proj-

ect: 1) museum constraints and perceptions, 2) a lack of sources, and 3) unreliable sources.

Museum Constraints and Perceptions

Financial, logistical, and architectural constraints — as well as public perceptions of Heritage Village — posed difficult challenges as the research process began. Although most of the structures that arrived at Heritage Village during the late 1970s came as part of a long-range site plan, museum administrators often had to work last-minute deals and find immediate sources of funding to save endangered and historically significant structures that faced the wrecking ball in later years. This situation prevented the museum from laying out buildings, structures, and features in a chronological or thematic orientation. Thus, a beach cottage from the mid-twentieth century sits a short distance from a log house built a century earlier and a railroad depot from the Florida land boom of the 1920s.

Researchers also had to confront the widely-held and incorrect assumption that Heritage Village represented a "pioneer" settlement. Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village, and similar venues, the layout of Heritage Village includes structures from a variety of time periods. While many visitors mistakenly view Heritage Village as an assembly of "pioneer" buildings, in truth most of the structures came into being long after the arrival of the railroad. In addition, all structures from the "pioneer era" have also experienced architectural alterations (such as the replacement of open-air windows with glass panes, subsequent room additions to buildings, etc.) that posed challenges for museum staff hoping to develop a long-range interpretive plan. For example, should the museum interpret the log cabin in the context of its original owners, or should the focus become its subsequent occupants? Also, any nostalgic attempt to characterize the early families as pioneers who led simple, agrarian lives would paint an incomplete — and inaccurate — portrait of the social history of early settlers.[4]

Lack of Sources

The research methodology included an extensive review of primary sources, starting with those kept at Heritage Village. An evaluation of biographical and building files at Heritage Village produced mixed results. Though the archives included a veritable cornucopia of material on some buildings and families, other individuals remained shrouded in mystery and many structures had an incomplete or uncertain provenance. For example, the builders and early occupants of the Greenwood House, originally located near Clearwater's harbor, remain unknown despite exhaustive research. Records in the building files offered more information about the air conditioning system installed in the Greenwood House after its arrival in 1982 than the families

who resided at the structure between 1888 and the 1920s. To complicate matters, archival files frequently included many scraps of paper with unconfirmed and unattributed anecdotes. Meanwhile, in some cases docents who had volunteered for many years had started to pass along stories or rumors that took on a life of their own and became part of the "historical" record.

Significant gaps in onsite archival collections complicated research as scholars visited other repositories. To reconstruct the social history of a family, researchers require a variety of primary sources that describe events at home, as well as primary and secondary sources about the community that provide a broader context. Diaries, journals, ledgers, genealogical records, and similar materials allow scholars to trace events and to articulate patterns that docents, curators, and public historians can craft into dialogues, displays, and presentations. City directories, census records, property records, newspaper clippings, and other documents offered insight into the changes in ownership and use of many of the structures; however, many questions remained unanswered. For example, early settlers of the "pioneer" era spent most of their time sustaining themselves through crop cultivation, maintaining their sailboats, and herding livestock; they had little time to keep diaries or similar records. Microfilm collections of newspapers are incomplete, and at best can only create a partial picture of the community fabric because most day-to-day events took place away from the curious eyes of the reporter. Finally, though larger university special collections departments and public libraries had well-indexed manuscript collections, smaller repositories could provide only limited research assistance or access.[5]

Even when structures had an obvious pedigree, researchers required additional information to trace patterns in ownership or occupancy. For example, Joshua and Mary Boyer moved out of their vintage 1877 cottage in 1898; other families lived in and took possession of that home in Tarpon Springs in subsequent years. A thorough narrative of the Boyer Cottage — or any of the other structures examined under this grant — required researchers to examine land use and ownership patterns *prior to* the building's construction, as well as during periods *after* the original occupants had moved out of the structure. This takes on even greater importance if the museum plans to interpret the structure in a time period after its (often original and) namesake occupants have moved away.

Unreliable Sources

Throughout the research phase of the grant, the humanities scholars maintained a strong sense of skepticism when evaluating documents and archival materials. Did the oral history interview reveal the entire story, or did the interviewee fail to mention information that might embarrass the family? How do researchers properly document family history when archival collections, cemetery markers, and (often incomplete) genealogical records have

different birth dates, death dates, and spelling variations (i.e., Stephen versus Steven)? Since "pioneer" families did not have to obtain building permits and usually did not keep their receipts, how can researchers ascertain the exact age of the earliest buildings? For example, in trying to verify the age of the McMullen-Coachman Log Cabin — the oldest existing building in Pinellas — researchers examined a variety of clippings, files, and family records. Although most sources mentioned 1852 as the year of construction, various family interviews and printed sources placed the year of construction anywhere between 1848 and 1852. William L. Straub's *History of Pinellas County, Florida: Narrative and Biographical*, considered an authoritative, if somewhat dated, source on Pinellas history, placed the year of construction in 1856. With historians, family members, and others unable even to agree on the year of construction for such an important building, the humanities scholars faced greater obstacles in formulating research because, in many cases, the best they could rely upon was scholarly speculation.[6]

The historiography of Pinellas County posed problems as well. Published histories of the Pinellas Peninsula vary in quality and accuracy. Some of the "classic" authors of the early twentieth century allowed civic promotion and unfettered boosterism to obscure their narrative. For example, Straub's book allocated more space and attention to biographical vignettes of "movers and shakers" than to the general history of Pinellas. On occasion, amateur historians even injected fiction or exaggeration into their narratives with hopes that exciting tales would attract newcomers to the area. Unfortunately, most of the published histories of Pinellas focus on a particular municipality, often at the expense of any events that took place beyond the city limits. While published histories may offer a starting point in the research process, they cannot answer all of the questions.[7]

Fostering Partnerships and Building a Sense of Community

Despite these challenges, the humanities scholars and other members of the research team can claim success in their efforts. They assembled an archival collection of source materials related to the structures at Heritage Village, provided a series of public programs (including lectures and television programs on county government access), developed architectural assessments and outlined preservation concerns, and created a 391-page, fully indexed narrative. This narrative not only reveals the social history of the structures, but also places the buildings within the larger context of Pinellas County history and fully describes any discrepancies found in the sources located. While some research teams may take nearly an entire year to complete a single application for the National Register of Historic Places, these researchers took the same amount of time to compile information on nearly thirty

structures that will benefit the museum, other cultural organizations, and the general public.[8]

As a result of this grant, Heritage Village now has an excellent research base of accurate information that will allow museum staff to move interpretive plans beyond the realm of assumptions, generalizations, and mere speculation. A better understanding of the buildings and their occupants permits curators to improve subject descriptions and cataloguing of exhibit items, ephemera, and archival materials and thereby increase access to and use of these collections. Although gaps do exist in the present knowledge of some structures and families, future research projects can address these issues directly without having to reinvent the research already completed. Docents and curators now have access to chapter-length narratives about the most popular structures, and can find relevant and properly documented information in a single source rather than scouring through many archival boxes. In addition, the scholars and many of the volunteers who devoted their energies to the grant have remained active in other efforts to enhance Heritage Village. Many of the volunteers are members of multiple cultural or historical organizations and, by extension, bring those resources to the table at meetings.[9]

Other cultural organizations have benefited from this grant. Throughout the project, researchers shared clippings, bibliographic resources, and materials with historical societies and libraries. The genealogical research accomplished during this grant complements the excellent resources found at the Largo Library, as well as the efforts of the Pinellas Genealogy Society and various municipal historical societies. However, as collaborative projects and digitization efforts increase, those who work or volunteer at various cultural institutions must remember that different venues may value collections and documental objects in a different manner: Librarians will continue to provide and encourage access, archivists will balance demands for access with the need to retain and preserve materials, and museums may mediate access by displaying only certain elements of their collection or by having only certain buildings open to the public at any given time. Institutional lines between libraries, museums, and archives might blur in the eyes of a public that clamors for greater (and usually free) access to resources and collections.[10]

Finally, the general public can enjoy museum exhibits, tours, historical publications, lectures, and public programs that accurately portray Pinellas County history. An emphasis on sources used by social historians, such as oral histories, will allow the public to enjoy museum exhibits and programs that are tangible, relevant, and inclusive. Researchers uncovered long-forgotten connections between residents in different Pinellas settlements, as well as connections between Pinellas and distant shores. For example, before the arrival of the railroad in 1888, many of the early settlers of the Anclote and

Anona regions hailed from the Bahamas, by way of Key West, a fact known by few residents of Pinellas today. In summary, public history programs and research efforts that connect libraries with other cultural institutions (such as humanities councils and historical societies) will pay great dividends as motivated patrons attend and participate in a variety of "free-choice learning" activities including folk festivals, book-discussion groups, special exhibits, and reenactments.[11]

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Notes

1 For a discussion of how Florida libraries (especially public libraries) can connect their patrons with the growing scholarly canon of digitized resources, see: Kathleen de la Peña McCook, "Libraries as Cultural Heritage Institutions Linking Lifelong Learners to the World," *Florida Libraries* 45 (Spring 2002): 19-21. To gain an understanding of the dichotomies of access to cultural heritage information (such as the different interests of specialists, collectors, and the general public), see: Ruth Wallach, "Does Cultural Heritage Information Want to Be Free? A Discourse on Access," Art Documentation 20 (Fall 2001): 42-45. Those with an interest in sustaining and finding outside resources for cultural heritage programs should consult: Diane M. Zorich, *A Survey of Digital Cultural Heritage Initiatives and Their Sustainability Concerns* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003), and Liz Bishoff and Nancy Allen, *Business Planning for Cultural Heritage Institutions: A Framework and Resource Guide to Assist Cultural Heritage Institutions with Business Planning and Sustainability of Digital Asset Management Programs* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2004).

2 *Clearwater Sun*, April 1, 1976, June 2, 1977; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 8, 1976, May 11, 1979, October 15, 1979, April 13, 1980; Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, May 3, 2003, Heritage Village, Largo.

3 The grant application emphasized the important relationship between acquiring accurate information through archival research and developing equally accurate exhibits and interpretive plans. See: Linda Barnickel, "A Firm Foundation: Archival Research and Interpretation at Historic Sites," *Archival Issues* 27 (2002): 9-21. For a description of the grant outline, see: *Pinellas County Stories Revealed through Heritage Village* (Florida Humanities Council grant number 1102-28831690).

4 Researchers must be careful to avoid the temptation of assuming that a lack of sources about "pioneer" residents confirms that these individuals must have lived simple lives. James Parramore McMullen's eldest son, Bethel, came of age at the family's log cabin, now located at Heritage Village. As a teenager in the late 1850s and early 1860s, he became a voracious reader of poetry. He collected books and assembled a small library that Union troops destroyed during the Civil War. A cursory examination of the log cabin might lead many people to assume that the "simple folk" who lived there had little time for such intellectual pursuits, but archival documents located during this research project disprove that theory.

5 See Table I in: Barnickel, "A Firm Foundation," 19.

6 For an example of how different published sources give a different age to the McMullenCoachman Log Cabin, see articles about the structure and the McMullen

family in the following publications: *Clearwater Sun*, February 1, 1940, February 5, 1950; Marjorie McMullen Keery to Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, June 18, 1971, Pinellas County Historical Commission Meeting Minutes, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 20, 1936, August 6, 1967, August 19, 1956; William L. Straub, *History of Pinellas County, Florida: Narrative and Biographical* (St. Augustine: The Record Company, 1929), insert between p. 28 and p. 29, 34; Robert C. Harris, "The Seven McMullen Brothers of Pinellas County," *Tampa Bay History* 1 (Fall/Winter 1979): 62-76.

7   Barnickel, "A Firm Foundation," 10-14.

8   The final research briefs are compiled in: James Anthony Schnur, *Heritage Villagers: A Social History of the Pinellas Peninsula as Revealed through the Structures at Heritage Village* (Largo: Heritage Village/Florida Humanities Council, 2004).

9   For a discussion of subject access in museums, see: Layna White, "Interpretation and Representation: The Who, Why, What, and How of Subject Access in Museums," *Art Documentation* 21 (Spring 2002), 21-22.

10 Phillip M. Edwards, "Collection Development and Maintenance across Libraries, Archives, and Museums: A Novel Collaborative Approach," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 48 (January 2004), 26-27, 30-32; Wallach, "Does Cultural Heritage Information Want to Be Free?," 42-44.

11 McCook, "Libraries as Cultural Heritage Institutions," 19-20; A Glenn Crothers, "'Bringing History to Life': Oral History, Community Research, and Multiple Levels of Learning," *Journal of American History* 88 (March 2002), 1146-1447.