



**Washington County Rural Heritage Museum  
Visitor Experience Plan Facilitation Session  
REPORT  
6/27/2024**

**Prepared by**

**SCOTT R GROVE** 

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The Washington County Rural Heritage Museum is located in Boonsboro, MD on MD Route 65. The museum is comprised of three independently-constructed 7,000 sf metal buildings that are owned by the Washington County Government. Collectively, the museum contents represent artifacts ranging from approximately 1860-1940. The exhibitions in each building were created by board members and volunteers, without the benefit of a curator. The complex also includes a Heritage Village, comprised of eight structures—three of which are historic—representative of the pre and post-Civil War era. Beyond the village is the Homestead, representative of rural life prior to 1865, featuring three authentic cabins and other vintage or recreated features. The museum is open on weekends from April-December as well as weekdays for touring groups.

On Thursday, June 6, 2024, Board Members, Friends, and invited guests of the Washington County Rural Heritage Museum attended a four-hour facilitation session, held in preparation for the creation of a Visitor Experience Plan. During the session, they discussed issues related to visitor attendance, marketing, current exhibits and potential approaches to improving their interpretation. Scott Grove, an interpretive planner, led the session.

**Attendance**

**Board of Directors**

Emilie Amt, PhD.

John Himes

John Hollyday

Charlotte Muritz

Donald Talbert

Brian Yurek

Elizabeth Stefanik, Museum Administrator and Programs Coordinator

**Friends**

Phil Muritz

Lee Downey

**Guests**

Tiffany Ahalt - Director of Sales, Hagerstown-Washington County CVB

Jamie Dick - Washington County Department of Public Works

Andrew Eshleman - Director, Washington County Department of Public Works

Roger Fairbourn - Owner, Roger Fairbourn Real Estate

Thomas Goroza - Washington County Department of Public Works

Abigail Koontz - Curator, Washington County Historical Society

Olivia Peterson - Assistant, Heart of the Civil War

Charles Schwalbe - Pres. Board of Directors, Boonsborough Museum of History

Keith Snyder - Program Mgr., Resource Ed and Visitor Services, Antietam Battlefield

Dr. Gary Willow - Assoc. Super. for Curriculum and Instruction, WCPS

## **Museum Audiences**

Attendees identified the following as the primary groups who visit the museum:

School Groups

- 4<sup>th</sup> graders

- 5<sup>th</sup> graders

- Mennonite and home school children

Senior Group Tours

WCRHM-sponsored special event attendees

Drive-by out of towners

Followers of Facebook

Friends of WCRHM

Donors

## **Marketing**

Board members and Friends identified the following marketing tools that are used in promoting the museum:

Word of Mouth

Google Search (unpaid)

Social Media

Website

Rack Cards

- State and county welcome centers

- Private businesses

Advertising

- Visitor Guide

- Local publications

Media releases

Cross promotion with other visitor destinations

CVB Referrals (Visitor Center and group tour leads)

## **Interpretive Tools and Approaches**

At present, there is limited non-docent led interpretation used in the museum buildings.

Lack of volunteers—and in particular trained docents—is an ongoing issue in the operation of the museum. Grove presented a slide show illustrating the various types of interpretation media used in museums today for the group's considered use in response to this issue.

These included: outdoor orientation panels, interior introductory panels, permanent exhibits, changing exhibits, objects with labels, displayed objects, hands-on low tech interactive, high tech interactive, immersive interactive, exhibit panels, reader rails, tactile exhibits, video exhibits, environmental sound, oral history, use of digital apps, artificial intelligence and virtual reality.

## **Signage**

The group then reviewed the museum's signage. Currently, two Maryland state signs naming the Agricultural Education Center and the Rural Heritage Museum are located approximately 1/8 mile north and south of the Center's entrance on MD Route 65. Tiffany Ahalt reminded the group how fortunate the Museum was to receive sign designation by the State of Maryland. A digital sign, owned by the Ag Center, with changing information also promotes the museum at the entrance of the complex.

Building 1, the Early Living Museum can be seen upon entry to the complex. Building 1 is attached to a larger structure that houses the County's official agricultural offices. Building 1 is signed with the words "Washington County Rural Heritage Museum." There is no mention of the Early Living Museum. The two other buildings comprising the Museum, Rural Heritage Farm Equipment Museum, and the Transportation Museum are signed accordingly on the face of each building with a different, more illustrative style of sign.

## **Early Living Museum**

Photos were presented showing the primary welcome/registration desk at the entrance of the Early Living Museum. Grove pointed out that there was no written introduction explaining to visitors the intent of the museum or what they could expect to see. He mentioned that the walls surrounding the staff desk might provide ample space for graphic panels that would, through imagery, set the tone for the museum and provide needed interpretation.

The group then viewed images of each of the vignettes within the building. With each exhibit the group was asked:

- What are the main storylines of this exhibit?
- Which artifacts are particularly noteworthy and for what reason?
- In the absence of a docent, what types of interpretation might make the exhibit more meaningful?
- Are there cross-marketing opportunities within the building, museum complex, or other nearby museums?

Comments that were made by attendees relating to each exhibit, were notated for use when developing the plan. Some of these included:

- Questions about accessibility to objects and, in other instances, no accessibility to displayed objects
- Creating interpretation that provides broader context, giving artifacts more meaning
- Moving some transportation and agricultural-related exhibits to other buildings
- Incorporating the use of archival photography to give greater meaning to displayed objects
- Possibly reducing the number of objects within some of the exhibits, because of overcrowding
- The removal of some of the lesser meaningful exhibits to make space for other needs (i.e. group orientation, lectures, children's activities, etc.)
- Greater incorporation of stories about women

- Incorporating more ethnic information about the immigrant groups and the significant role they had in the settling and growing Washington County
- Greater incorporation of African American history, which would include slavery

### **Rural Heritage Farm Equipment Museum**

As before, the group was shown photographs of each of the exhibits in Building 2. Many of the comments made during this portion of the session were similar to those expressed about the Early Living Museum. Again, there was a lack of orientation on the primary subject of agriculture in Washington County that was felt to be missing. However, other comments included:

- The significant and almost universal role that tillage and plowing had in agriculture
- The vital role that hay had in farming
- The introduction and evolution of conservation techniques
- Connecting exhibitions of farm equipment to specific ag industries to give them more meaning and help communicate that industry's place in the County ag industry
- Connecting elements found in some of the exhibits (all three buildings and the Heritage Village) with annual special events (essentially, promotion)
- Telling the important story that mills (grist, flour, and lumber) played in the development of Washington County's towns

### **Transportation Museum**

Of all three of the museums Building 3 offers the greatest amount of interpretation. While much of it is solely text on the written page, it does include photography, ephemera, and other elements that makes it engaging. Again, it was felt that an orientation to the museum would contribute to the overall fulfillment it offers. Other comments included:

- More history on the evolution of the bicycle and the role it had in transportation, changing social behaviors, and the development of future inventions
- How some early bicycle manufacturers began making automobiles
- Increased information about the early independent car industry that sprang up across America
- The role that the automobile and bicycle had in improving roads in America
- With this wonderful assemblage of superb automobiles, more information about:
  - The manufacturer
  - Where the car was built and the auto industry that existed in that city
  - Info about what makes each automobile so unique, its innovations, etc.
  - Any other provenance related to the car

### **Heritage Village/Homestead**

Another unique asset to the museum is the Heritage Village and Homestead, which provide an entirely different and unique experience for visitors. Because of staffing limitations, these buildings can only be opened for special events or by appointment. Nonetheless, the grounds of the Village and Homestead and their exteriors are always open for viewing. For this reason, there was general belief that additional interpretation, likely the use of wayside exhibits, would contribute greatly to the experience visitors have when the buildings are closed.

### **Additional Comments**

- There is considerable distance between the museum buildings and the Heritage Village and Homestead that can prove daunting to older visitors and those with physical disabilities
- With the exception of days in which special events are hosted (that begin in the morning), the museum's general hours are limited to weekend afternoons from April-December
- There is a need for a space in all buildings where groups can sit and hear orientation, interpretation, lectures, activities, etc.
- Deaccessioning items or returning lesser valued objects to owners should be considered to make way for greater interpretation and other newer exhibits

### **In Conclusion**

While there are numerous issues to resolve, Washington County Rural Heritage has many positive assets and attributes that would be coveted by other museums, including:

- An enormous repository of important antiquities that tangibly help represent Washington County and the mid-Atlantic region from 1865-1940
- The use of three well-constructed buildings to house their collections
- An antique car and bicycle collection that is considered superb by any standard
- A Heritage Village and Homestead that help to provide a living experience
- Good, basic interpretation that can be expanded upon when needed

Following attendee's comments and amendments made to this document, Grove will proceed with the writing of the Visitor Experience Plan.

Respectfully submitted,  
Scott R. Grove  
June 27, 2024