

West Branch Resource Team
Heritage Tourism Section
Donna Ann Harris

National Trends in Heritage Tourism

For the past fifteen years the historic preservation movement has been encouraging communities with historic resources to engage in heritage tourism. The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines heritage tourism as “traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes irreplaceable historic, cultural and natural resources.”¹

The heritage tourism effort is aimed at historic sites throughout the country and designed to create more visitors to properties open to the public. This tactic has professionalized many historic sites that were run entirely by volunteers, and helped restore many national, state and locally significant properties for their new role as tourist attractions.

About the heritage traveler

Our knowledge of the heritage tourist and their spending patterns comes from a study completed in 2003 by the Travel Industry Association, a Washington DC based non-profit that provides research for the travel industry. Their study called 2003 Heritage/Cultural Traveler Report, detailed that travelers to historic sites and museums spent more money and stayed longer, thus generating additional local tax revenue in the form of sales tax and local hotel/motel taxes. From this study we learned that:

- 58% of adult travelers included an historic activity or event in their travel in 2002
- 41% visited an historic site, building, home or monument
- 28% visited an historic community.²

These figures were a wake up call to many historic site operators that had not already jumped on the tourism bandwagon. From these statistics many site operators felt that the American public was genuinely interested in their offerings.

Other key statistics from that study:

- 40% of these travelers were baby boomer households
- 60% had college degrees
- 33% earned more than 75K
- 33% traveled with children.³

¹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, Cultural Heritage Tourism Fact Sheet 2007, available at www.culturalheritagetourism.org.

² Travel Industry Association, 2003 Cultural Heritage Traveler Report, available at www.tia.org/researchpubs/executive_summaries/historic_cultural.html.

These statistics were widely published in the historic preservation press as indicating that the people visiting historic sites were very much like the volunteers and board members working to preserve these historic structures.

Marketing to visitors

Travelers trying to decide which site to visit most often used the traditional and tried and true method--word of mouth. Comments about an interesting visit to an historic site from friends, relatives and colleagues did more to influence visitation than any other form of advertising. Thus a satisfied visitor becomes the historic site's best marketing vehicle. The TIA statistics tell us that most heritage travelers are drawn to an historic site for an event.

Crucial to the actual visit however is the existence of a web site for the historic property. The web site is where potential visitors could learn about the opening times, offerings, directions, admission prices and policies. Web sites are seen as critical to the visit, as adults planning visits (most often female), make their plans at night or on weekends when the historic site is inevitably closed. Often these visits are planned the night before the visit, thus making an up to date web site critical to any visitor.

More recent information on the heritage traveler

These statistics from the TIA report are now five years old. No new report about the heritage traveler has been prepared or is in the offing. The intervening years have created a sea change in the historic preservation field, especially in heritage travel. It is clear that the field has fundamentally changed, as many more options have emerged for the traveler's increasingly limited leisure time.

An article in the Spring 2005 issue of *Forum Journal*, the professional journal of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, included a provocative article entitled "Why is Historic Site Visitation Down?" by Carolyn Brackett. She gave three basic reasons for the decline in travel to historic sites.

The effect of national events-- The tragedy of September 11, 2001; an anthrax scare; war in Iraq; a struggling economy; record amounts of snow, ice and rain; a season of hurricanes; and exorbitant gas prices have all had a tremendous impact on where, when, and if Americans travel..... "It is easy to make a cause-and-effect relationship. We cannot ignore that. But we also cannot ignore that the downward trend [for historic sites] was in place before that."

A plethora of choices There is competition for people's time. "We have to ask if people want to see what happened before we were here and to understand what it means to us today." These historic places must also compete against other leisure activities ranging from visiting theme parks or beach resorts to sports to simply staying at home.

³ Travel Industry Association.

Changes in travel patterns- Half of all travel now takes place on the weekends, and planning time has diminished dramatically. Making historic sites accessible when travelers decide they want to visit is an ongoing challenge for sites that rely on volunteers or offer limited hours of operation.⁴

Bracket also noted the following examples of the decline in visitation from these well known historic attractions.

- Since 2000, visitation at Monticello has experienced a sharp decline, from an average of 525,000-550,000 annually to 465,000 in 2004.
- Colonial Williamsburg's annual visitation has declined from 929,000 to 768,000.
- Mount Vernon has seen a drop in visitation from 1 million in 2000 to 792,000 in 2003⁵

James Vaughan, Vice President for Stewardship of Historic Sites at the National Trust, also weighed in on the decline in travel to historic sites. He made these remarks at a talk on February 1, 2006 given for the Heritage Philadelphia Program, a program of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

"Let me just cite a few recent headlines. These are all from the last year. "With costs high and attendance low, many museums are finding the need to scale back." *Boston Globe*, May, 2005. "Museum quietly slid into insolvency." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May, 2005. "A historic replica retrenches." *Boston Globe*, November, 2005. "Why rural museums are becoming ancient history." *New York Times*, December, 2005.⁶

Mr. Vaughan continued by saying "I could literally spend the whole night giving you headline quotes about declining attendance at museums. . . . If you look at their attendance patterns, one thing is clear; that is, that the attendance has been steadily declining, slowly but surely, for more than 20 years at all of these sites." He remarked that Williamsburg, Mount Vernon and Sturbridge Village where visitation has declined in recent years were among "the biggest and best known historic sites in America. They have the biggest marketing budgets, the biggest development staffs. They have the most powerful and best connected boards, but they're still not financially sustainable."⁷

Mr. Vaughn went on to describe the historic sites owned by the National Trust. "The National Trust which has -- we have about 20 sites that have a long enough attendance history. . . . When we look at their attendance patterns, all except two of those 20 sites have the same declining attendance. It's not big, it's two or three percent a year, but you spread that out over 20 years and it makes a real impact on your budget and your operations. By the way, the two exceptions to

⁴ Carolyn Brackett, "Why is Visitation at Historic Sites Down?," *Forum Journal*, spring 2005.

⁵ Brackett.

⁶ James P. Vaughan, "Historic Houses in the 21st Century: Preserving Historic Houses Today," a talk presented on 1 February 2006 at Heritage Philadelphia Program meeting, transcript in author's possession.

⁷ Vaughan.

our patterns are Drayton Hall and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and my theory about why they're both beating the trend is they tell great stories.”⁸

Lack of statistics from small historic sites

There is little statistical information available for all the “rank and file” historic sites about their visitation statistics. In fact, we do not know how many house museums or historic sites exist in the United States. Most are run entirely by volunteers and they are not tracked by state or other heritage entity. The last directory of house museums was published in 1999 and noted there was more than 8000 and this volume has not been updated.⁹

None of the nonprofit owned historic sites are required to report visitation to any entity. It is not part of the IRS 990 form that all nonprofits must file if their revenues are more than \$25,000. Many state-owned historic sites keep accurate visitation records, as do sites owned by the National Park Service and the Presidential Libraries. We were very grateful that both the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library were very generous in sharing their visitation statistics with the Resource Team. This information is presented below.

More up to date research on historic site visitation

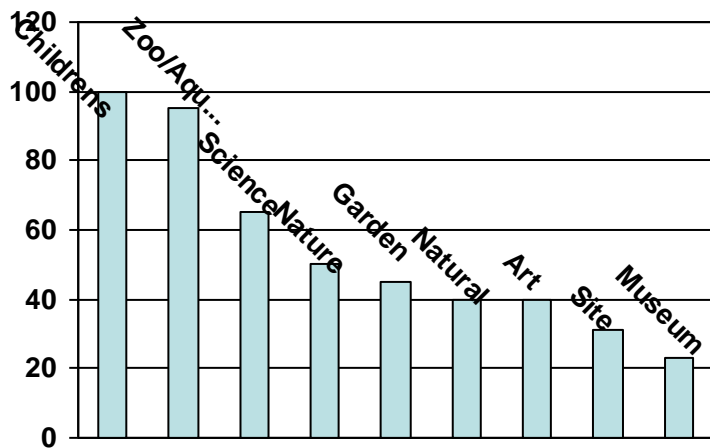
A 2007 survey completed by Reach Advisors about visitation to outdoor historic sites polled over 5,500 visitors. This survey noted that 31% of visitors also went to another historic site and 23% visited a history museum.¹⁰ This was in stark contrast to their visits to other venues.

When asked “what other type of museums do you enjoy visiting with your family” they noted that they visited the following other venues.

⁸ Vaughan

⁹ Patricia Chambers Walker and Thomas Graham, compilers, *Directory of Historic House Museums in the United States*. Lakewood CA: AltaMira Press, 1999.

¹⁰ Susie Wilkening, “Research Yields Important Information on Visitors to History Museums and Historic Sites,” *Cultural Heritage Tourism News*, spring 2008.



Graph 1: 2007 Reach Advisors Survey¹¹

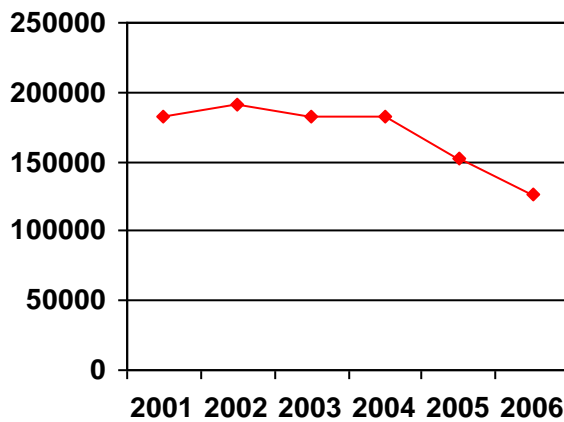
The statistics from Reach Advisors merely reinforce the gloomy news about the decline in visitation to historic sites nationwide.

To conclude, national the trend for travel to historic sites is decidedly down. How is this being manifested at the local level?

Tourism Trends at Herbert Hoover National Historic Site

Cheryl Schreier, Superintendent of the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site was kind enough to supply the draft version of “The Long Range Interpretive Plan for the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site” to the Resource Team members prior to our visit, which included a wealth of information useful for the Resource Team’s work.

The visitation statistics for the Hoover site are similar to national trends and are expressed in the graph below.



Graph 2 Visitor Trends Herbert Hoover National Historic Site¹²

¹¹ Wilkening.

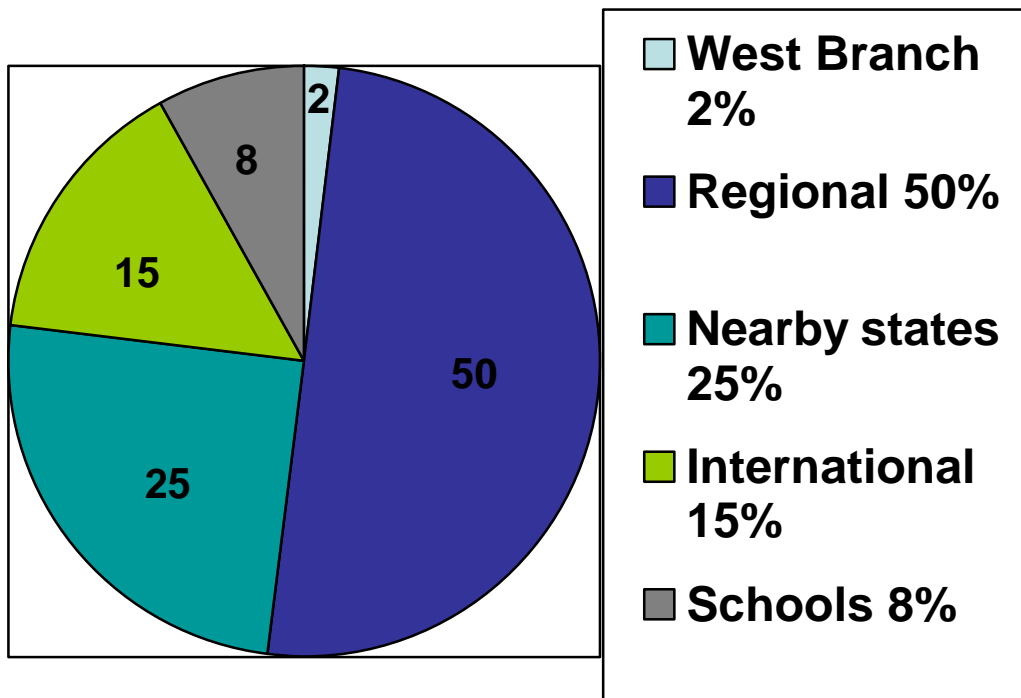
¹² Draft version of the Long Range Interpretive Plan for the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, May 2007.

Visitation to the Hoover site (which includes the Library as a joint ticket) has been down in the last five years, from a height of 191,812 in 2002 down to 127,859 in 2006. The downward trend has been particularly sharp in the last two years where drops of 10% and 11% have been recorded. The NPS is fully aware of the national and local trends. Rising gas prices and an uncertain economy may also further weaken tourism nationwide and in West Branch this summer.

Where are the visitors coming from?

Visitors that do come to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site in 2006 were:

West Branch neighbors 2%; Regional visitors 50%; nearby states 25%; International 15%; and School groups 8%¹³



Graph 3: Visitors coming to HHNHS¹⁴

¹³ Long Range Interpretive Plan.

¹⁴ Long Range Interpretive Plan.

When do visitors come to the Hoover site?

Visitors come in predictable patterns related to good weather. Visitation is heavy in May, July, August and then spikes markedly in December which is the month for the highest visitation.

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
#	5422	3867	4505	9398	15070	9863	13894	17333	10175	9075	7415	21042

Chart 4: Visitors by month to HHNHS¹⁵

Predictably the large events held in the community including Hooverfest in August, and again at Christmas in early December directly feed into comments about visitation during events as expected from the experiences of the TIA report.

Visitation to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library

The Resource Team members also visited with Timothy Walch, Executive Director at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Museum and Library, who shared with us the statistics from his site as well as the other Presidential Libraries across the country. The Herbert Hoover Presidential Museum and Library has seen declines in visitation in the last five years, going from a high of 68,116 in 2000 to 55,564 in 2005. The Hoover Library’s visitation pattern was erratic: some years up, others down during that period. Other presidential libraries have similar erratic visitation statistics, particularly libraries/museums for Reagan, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy and Johnson. Mr. Walch speculated that these spikes were due to special events, anniversaries or special exhibits that drew decidedly large crowds. Finally, the Eisenhower, Carter, Ford, and the first George Bush libraries, have seen consistently downward trends during those years.¹⁶

What do visitors want today?

Given the overall decline in visitors to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and to the Presidential Library, West Branch Main Street should focus on expanding the offerings available for the visitors that DO come to these important visitor attractions.

Reach Advisors staff member Erica Donniss noted that the two main markets for historic sites are baby boomers and families with children.¹⁷ These groups look for very different experiences at historic sites. While these experiences are specific to the historic site itself, visitor desires can inform how the visitors use the downtown and the kinds of experiences they seek. Baby Boomer visitors wanted to extend their experiences at historic sites such as longer hours, longer visits,

¹⁵ Long Range Interpretive Plan.

¹⁶ Office of Presidential Libraries, Museum Visitors 1975-2005.

¹⁷ Erica Donniss, “History was not just 9 to 5” Extended Experiences at Museums” in Museum Audience Insights Blog, April 22, 2008.

and all day, after hours, weekends, nights and special activities.¹⁸ These desires were also expressed in another recent article.

In an article published in 2007 in *History News*, the magazine of the American Association for State and Local History, authors John and Anita Durel spoke about what visitors want today. In a nutshell:

“Baby boomers want a relaxing getaway with romantic hearth side dining.They wish to step back in time, but with all the creature comforts such as staying at a nice bed and breakfasts or cozy inns. ... These visitors wish to interact with the site on their own terms including visiting the site after hours, and to use the grounds for birding, walking, nature photography and dog walking. Ultimately they wish deep personal connections with the historic site.”¹⁹ For visitors with children who visit historic sites, they wish to immerse themselves in the past, and to learn about everyday people not just the famous.²⁰

Only in retrospect can we fully understand why special events at historic sites are so important to visitors based on the TIA report of 2003. Today we know that static exhibits or dry docent-led tours are not what visitors want. Unless the site can enliven their offerings and respond to the desires as noted above, with interesting stories about the site, visitation will continue to decline.

Recommendations

Given what we know about the heritage traveler nationally and how it plays out locally, there are several opportunities for Main Street West Branch to capitalize upon for the visitors that come today to the Hoover site. The organization has an opportunity to develop programming in the downtown that will mutually support Park visitation and yield a successful downtown shopping environment for residents and visitors alike.

The following are recommendations for Main Street West Branch as they continue their development as a downtown management organization.

Focus on regional visitors

According to the Draft Long Range Interpretive Plan for the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, the primary market for Park visitors is less than 150 miles away. This creates great opportunities for Main Street merchants because the market for visitors to the historic site and for their stores is similar. The interpretive plan noted that the following were the primary markets for visitors to the site: Fifty (50) percent of visitors came from Iowa City, Quad Cities, and Eastern Iowa. Twenty five (25) percent came from the surrounding states: Minnesota, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri and Kansas.

¹⁸ Donnis.

¹⁹ John and Anita Durel, “A Golden Age for Historic Properties” *History News*, summer 2007.

²⁰ Golden Age.

Regional visitors are similar in needs and tastes to local visitors and West Branch merchants can capitalize on these similarities. Tourist goods such as postcards, pens, trinkets etc. can be sold at many outlets in the downtown, not just at the Library or Park visitor center. Food related shops, such as delis, bakeries, sandwich shops and full and partial service restaurants are also natural visitor amenities. We feel these shops/restaurants would do well in West Branch based on the leakage analysis (see other parts of this report for more information).

Learn more about event visitors and refashion events around the information

The spike in visitors to the Park during the major events is expected based on information from the TIA 2003 study. Continue to collect surveys about why people are coming to West Branch and HHNHS and the Museum/library. The Park is planning to do a visitor study this summer and this information will be very valuable for downtown merchants, if made available to MSWB.

We believe that there is great opportunity to learn more about visitors to the two major events in town, Hooverfest and A Christmas Past. Main Street West Branch would be wise to conduct a valid survey of these visitors during the events to determine why they come, and gather traditional demographic information and their opinions about the downtown. We suggest you partner with the marketing department of the University perhaps using this survey as a class project, an internship or as a student project.

We believe that the organization needs to know more about these visitors: what they like and want to see in the downtown. This information could help you refashion all or some of your Main Street sponsored events, assist existing merchants to expand their offerings, and help recruit new merchants to fill in the gaps.

Focus on the shoulder seasons for West Branch Main Street events

Given the visitation peaks at the HHNHS, the local Main Street organization would be wise to plan its special events on the months when visitation is lower at the Park, to create yet another reason for visitors to spend an entire day in West Branch. According to the Park's visitor trends, the following months showed lower visitation than other months: October, November and June.

The Scarecrow festival, held in October, is a good example of a community-focused event that could drive additional visitors to the Park if widely published. Similarly the summer concert series especially in June along with the farmers market could drive visitors to come to West Branch. The events held by the Main Street organization provide yet another reason for visitors to come to West Branch and the Park. It would be mutually supportive if the Park could include all community events, especially those held in the downtown on the Park web site with a click through for more information to the Main Street West Branch web site, if this is possible.

Cooperate with regional tourism entities

Currently Main Street West Branch is a member of the Eastern Iowa Tourism Association. This regional group helps market the attractions to the area. This group already includes the two major events Hooverfest and A Christmas Past in their publications, but there are additional

opportunities to add other events such as the concert series/farmers market and other special event offerings to this publication.

Similarly Main Street West Branch should work closely with Silos and Smokestacks Heritage Area to be sure that all Main Street events are listed in their publications. The lead time for some of the publications may be a year in advance, thus forcing the Main Street organization to create their events calendar in similar fashion. Main Street West Branch should get to know the Heritage Area Director, perhaps as part of a consortium with the other Main Street program in their service area in an effort to promote the Main Street areas as an itinerary for a regional tour (more information below on this topic).

Jointly promote the Main Street towns in the region

The Main Street programs in the region have many options to promote themselves together as a regional destination to the large players in the region, such as Silos and to the Tourism Association. Joint marketing programs for good weather/one time festivals, or for continuing events such as farmers markets/concerts in the Park, can generate good will and additional stays by tourists in local hotels. Consider a partnership with hotel chains along a regional tour itinerary between the sites as a way to generate additional hotel motel taxes for the city collecting them. Seek grants from that tax collecting entity to publish rack cards or brochures about the itineraries you put in place.

If Main Street Iowa decides again to promote tourism to the Iowa Main Street communities, become an active player in any publication they develop. Look also to put any joint marketing campaign developed by the Main Street organizations on many travel web sites as possible, including your own and all the partners. Consider using You Tube and social networking sites such as My Space or Facebook, as some of the less traditional venues for promoting West Branch's downtown. The theme of the Main Street conference to be held in March 2009 in Chicago is Web 2.0, and we expect that many sessions will deal with how communities are using technology to advance local Main Street agendas.

Create social places downtown for residents and visitors

Heritage Square presents great opportunities to draw visitors into the midst of the downtown if the site was repurposed into an active space rather than the passive one it is currently. We suggest that this space be enlivened with benches, colorful banners and flags, temporary tables and chairs for seasonal dining. This space should function as the Town Square, where residents seated at a café would interact with visitors from the Park. The lively gathering place would draw visitors from the Park because of the colorful banners, activity and seating opportunities. Information should be available about the downtown in this location, perhaps by replacing the exhibit in the gazebo, with a kiosk that contained a map of the downtown, list of merchants by type, and a weekly updated event list. Further information is below.

Drawing visitors from the Park into the downtown

Encouraging visitors to the Park to walk the extra half a block into the downtown has many components that other consultants on the Resources Team will spend much more time addressing in their sections of this report. The following methods are meant as ideas that will be fleshed out by others in the report.

Way finding signage is essential, to direct visitors in cars and as pedestrians into downtown and telling them where to Park. The Park is planning major changes to their signage system. The way finding system we are suggesting should augment, expand and compliment what the NPS installs.

A colorful and attractive Heritage Square—Redesign Heritage Square to become an active gathering place for residents and visitors alike. Suggest outdoor seating so visitors can rest, in combination with tables and chairs for outdoor café or dining. A small café could locate on this site during the good weather.

Kiosks downtown with maps, directory, news events--The gazebo could be repurposed to become a kiosk with information about the downtown including a map of the district, a directory of all shops, services and stores, and a listing of the week's events.

Young Hoover's Footsteps—This project was suggested by a committee member and we wholeheartedly endorse the idea. Hoover's life as a child in West Branch is not just limited to his birthplace, but extends into the downtown, as many of the buildings he saw as a youngster still exist today. A trail could be created with a map, audio or directional signage to encourage visitors to trace young Herbert Hoover's footsteps as he walked from home to town, and what he might have encountered along the way. Photos of Hoover in town would help amplify the narrative. The trail could be fully exploited in new media such as pod casts downloaded from the Main Street West Branch web site. Also suggested were life size metal silhouettes of Hoover as a young boy around town which describe aspects of the interpretive message.

Interpretive signage about historic buildings on Main Street—Consider a simple signage program for the historic buildings in the downtown to highlight their history and architectural character. These signs could be as simple as an attractively designed historic photo and a brief paragraph about the property placed in the storefront window. It is best that these signs be coordinated for the entire downtown. As funds are identified, more permanent signs might be installed on the exterior of the properties with the owner's permission. These signs could be useful for visitors who come to town when most stores are not open (Sunday), and in the evenings after stores have closed for the day.

Restaurant menus in the window—Both residents and visitors alike will benefit if food service establishments would post their menus in the window of their locations, especially if daily specials or seasonal menus are offered.

Understand the limits of special events.

Special events are designed to build downtown traffic. Their primary purpose is NOT to ring cash registers that day. Visitors who come to a special event may shop at a store or restaurant, but the prime motivation of a special event to acquaint people with the location so they will come back and visit at another time. Retail events are solely designed to ring cash registers that day. The two big special events Hooverfest and A Christmas Past are highly developed special events that take an army of volunteers to pull off. The Main Street West Branch organization should reinforce with merchants the role of the existing special events and encourage them to be open and offer special incentives and opportunities for these visitors who might wander into the store/restaurant, so they will come back again.

For new special events, we encourage you to focus on quality rather than quantity. We understand that there has been a difficulty in attracting a chair for the summer concert series. While these events are already on the calendar and expected, the organization must muddle through them without a strong leader for these activities. In planning next year, we would encourage you to find a chair early. If no one volunteers, then cut the event, even if it is popular. An an-hoc leadership arrangement will not lead to a quality event. We also encourage the Promotion Committee to continue to encourage all events to at least break even.

Be open when visitors come

We understand that there is a concern that many merchants have opening hours that mirror the opening hours at the Park, from 9-5PM. Most merchants are not open on Sunday. Convenient hours for residents might be 11-7PM so those returning home from their work in Iowa City could use the store before returning home. We understand that merchants already have a long week, and asking them to adjust their hours will only add hours to their already exhausting schedule. We suggest that a compromise might be to adjust the hours of the store to better reflect the spikes in visitor attendance at the Park. Merchants would be best served if they were open during all the special events held at the Park and by the Main Street West Branch organization. Second we suggest that merchants adjust their hours to an 11-7 schedule during the high visitor season from April to October, and then again during December, to capture the largest crowds coming to the Park. We also suggest that merchants adjust their hours to serve the residents (11-7PM), their core customers, and treat any visitor income as a bonus.

Discuss the future of the Heritage Museum with the Heritage Museum board

We understand that the Heritage Museum, located in a storefront on Main Street, is not open because it is not habitable. We also understand that the Heritage Museum organization has difficulty staffing the site because they are volunteers. We recommend that the Main Street organization visit with the Heritage Museum Board of Directors to determine the current state of affairs. We encourage the Heritage Museum Board to determine the real costs of bringing the building into habitable condition, even if the organization does not have the funds to make these repairs at the present time. Facts are needed to be able to make decisions about the future of the site. We also encourage the Museum Board to review the deed giving the property to the

organization to determine if there are reverter clauses and their implication. Again, facts are needed in order to make decisions.

Ultimately the Museum Board must determine if the organization has the financial wherewithal to maintain its building and its collections. If the Board believes that the costs to maintain and restore are far in excess of its ability to care for the building and collection, then we recommend that the Board consider moving the collection to another location and consider a new use for the building if the deed permits, subject to the reverter clause (if there is one).

This will be a very difficult decision, but the Museum Board must act on its stewardship responsibilities to preserve the collection and maintain the building even if this means that they must vacate the property. Other historic site stewards across the country are also wrestling with this dilemma and successes have been profiled in a book *New Solutions for House Museums*, written by the author of this section of the Resource Team report.²¹

Compliments to Main Street West Branch

The Resource Team was very impressed with the quality of the work being undertaken by the committees and the Board of Directors. For a two year old Main Street organization, you are making great strides to develop your volunteer base, raise funds, put on quality events, and develop and expand partnerships with other organizations and agencies in the community and region. Your staff is highly motivated, has excellent people skills, and exhibits common sense along with wisdom well beyond her years. As with any fledgling Main Street organization, you are just beginning to understand the market for the community and how this can benefit local merchants. Other sections of this report will detail the opportunities ahead in that arena.

The Resource Team was particularly impressed with the preservation ethic in the community, as exhibited by the maintenance of the historic structures in the downtown. Property owners clearly care about their structures and have lavished attention on their restoration or better yet have just maintained what was passed to them by prior generations. By now you know that Main Street is an historic preservation based economic development program. We are so pleased that the community of West Branch understands and embraces historic preservation during the initial years of your Main Street work.

²¹ Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Homes*, AltaMira Press, 2007.