Using Public Data to Preserve Historic Resources

By Abbi Jo Wittman and Michael Koop

Stillwater, Minnesota (pop. 19,915) is located 20 miles east of St. Paul, though its close proximity to the metro area was not always known as one of its primary attributes. The region’s 19th century lumbering activities along the St. Croix River, part of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway between Minnesota and Wisconsin, has always been what brought people to the area.

Stillwater is known as the birthplace of Minnesota because, in 1848, the first territorial convention that began the process of establishing Minnesota as a state was held in what is present-day downtown. Shortly thereafter the town site was platted in a traditional grid pattern, predominantly nestled in a geological bowl-like area, with some city blocks extending through ravines and to the top of the bluff sides. During the logging era, Stillwater’s main street had built its back to the riverfront’s industrial nature, with the residential areas sneaking up the hillsides. Along with the construction of the large homes of lumber barons, smaller homes for the community’s working class extended far beyond the blufftop. The loss of the lumber industry, followed by several periods of economic decline throughout the 20th century, resulted in a community that could not afford to tear down when everyone else was. As a result, Stillwater contains an approximately three square mile area of relatively intact, turn of the 19th century wood-framed structures.

Stillwater’s Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) was established in 1973, the second in the state after Minneapolis, and the City of Stillwater (City) became a Certified Local Government (CLG) in 1988. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the HPC worked alongside Rivertown Restoration, a citizen-led, preservation-based local nonprofit to list nearly one dozen individual sites and structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Since the 1989 National Register listing of the Stillwater Bridge, a Waddel and Harrington vertical-lift bridge connecting Stillwater with Wisconsin’s St. Joseph Township, and the downtown Stillwater Commercial Historic District in 1992, Stillwater transitioned into a regional tourist destination. It
was during this time that Stillwater’s preservation efforts shifted towards preservation planning and education.

Through the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the HPC utilized numerous CLG grants to support preservation planning projects to gain a better understanding of its historic resources, with a significant focus on its numerous pre-World War II residential neighborhoods. Work included the development of historic context studies and the identification of historic preservation planning areas, cultural resource inventories, and reconnaissance level surveys for 10 of 16 different neighborhood areas mostly platted prior to 1900. This work largely focused on increasing the knowledge base of the HPC and City staff regarding the large concentration of residential housing stock in the city’s oldest neighborhoods but also resulted in recommendations for numerous sites and districts to be considered for local or national designation. While Stillwater has been fortunate to be granted funding from the State Historic Preservation Office for some of these projects, the City’s annual budget for preservation-related programs and activities is often only $5,000.

Stillwater has seen its share of economic decline, but it has also experienced significant economic booms. It has been during those times that Stillwater’s thriving nature placed its historic resources at greatest risk. With no protected residential historic districts, the City incurs an increase in demolition requests of its pre-1946 housing stock. These demolitions create gaps in the residential streetscapes and neighborhoods, threatening to reduce the overall historic character. A little over 10 years ago, the HPC recognized the need to better educate the public and reach out to the community about the importance of preservation and the community’s historic buildings that contribute to the overall quaint community character. To that end, the City and HPC utilized CLG grants
Heirloom Homes and Landmarks website

To complete two significant public education and outreach projects that encourage the conservation of the city’s cultural resources and serve to entertain as well as to educate residents and others about the history and significance of those resources.

Heirloom Homes and Landmark Sites Program

The first project occurred in 2008-2011, when the City and HPC conducted three phases of the Heirloom Homes and Landmark Sites Program (HHLSP). A recognition program designed to honor property owners who maintain the historic character of their building or site, the program goals are to:

• Acknowledge property owners who have voluntarily preserved or restored their historic home, building, or site;
• Showcase historic homes on Stillwater’s HHLSP website;
• Educate the general public about historic properties in Stillwater;
• Provide technical assistance that shows home owners how to maintain and update the historic character of their homes; and

• Preserve Stillwater’s historic neighborhoods to ensure that the community maintains its identity and appeal as a historic river city and tourist destination.

The HHLSP website provides information about the history of Stillwater’s pre-World War II neighborhoods, and brief histories, descriptions, and photographs of houses and landmarks. Search features allow website visitors to query homes and landmarks by neighborhood, street, address, date of construction, historic name, architectural style, architect, or builder. Mapping features also allow visitors to develop personalized tours of various properties. In addition, the website includes information on how to preserve historic houses as well as preservation success stories that describe the rewards and challenges of historic house restoration. Though the data developed for the HHLSP program was grant funded, a portion of the website was developed in-house.

More than 150 homes are featured on the website which has attracted tens of thousands of visitors from across the United States and 65 countries. The website is an excellent tool for educating existing and future residents, including potential applicants through the program application brochure, tourists, and others about the history and significance of some of Stillwater’s historic buildings. In addition, the website serves as an attractive and positive public relations tool for both the HPC and the City.
Historic Stillwater
The Birthplace of Minnesota
Downtown Walking Tour

Self-Guided Audio-Visual Walking Tours
The second public education and outreach effort occurred in 2012-2013 and in 2013-2014, when the HPC produced self-guided audio-visual walking tours. The first focused on prominent historic commercial structures in and near the National Register-listed Stillwater Commercial Historic District. In the first 90 days of use, 3,519 viewers watched the videos, mostly from within the United States, but also from Canada, Mexico, South America, Scandinavia, and Germany. The tour of commercial properties consists of 14 short videos that include historical information, interesting stories, and photos of properties. The videos can be downloaded from the City’s website to mobile devices for self-guided tour use or viewed on the City’s YouTube Channel while standing directly in front of the site. The residential tour focuses on a prominent hillside to the southwest of downtown, starting where the commercial tour ends at the Washington County Historic Courthouse. Featuring 18 National Register and HHLSP structures in two different tour loops, this series also aims to acknowledge different architectural styles and features in the neighborhood.

Since 2013 the local cable television channel, Valley Access, began regular airing of the tour video series. Additionally, accompanying walking tour brochures have also been developed for the different tour routes. Reprinting costs, however, had a significant impact on the HPC’s modest budget. A number of years ago the HPC partnered with the local Convention and Visitors Bureau to publish abbreviated maps in the annual visitor’s guide. Publications include QR codes that direct users to the full tour loops online, reducing the need for continued printing of the full paper brochure.

Minnesota Reflections
These two programs gave the Stillwater HPC, its staff and the City a better understanding that the public desires to access historic property information online. So, in 2016 the Stillwater HPC, with assistance from the Minnesota Digital Library,
Historic Downtown Stillwater

1. **Lowell Park**
   Located by the City Beautiful movement, and supported by a donation from businessman Elmore Lowell, the city worked to improve its waterfront by engaging landscape architect William Fisk Kohler to design a new park on the levee. A few years later, after the railroad turned over land on the north side of Chester Street, nationally known landscape architecture firm Morrell and Nichols created a plan for this section of the park. The park was built in 1913.

2. **Lift Bridge**
   Chester Street
   Stillwater's first bridge across the St. Croix opened in 1876. The lift bridge was completed in 1915, and is one of the three remaining vertical lift highway bridges built in Minnesota and Wisconsin prior to World War II. This style of lift bridge is commonly known as a Wadsworth and Merrington vertical lift. The span is raised and lowered by steel cables passing over sheaves at the top of a shaft mounted on the spuds below.

3. **Freight House**
   235 Water Street
   From the date of its construction in 1896 until recently the Commerce of Stillwater centered on the railroads. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad freight house and depot served virtually every commercial interest in the city. The building set to work using heavy mill timber; two feet thick lime foundation walls, and eighteen inch exterior walls housing thirty feet high. Flooroung four inches wide and one inch thick were molded from the timber found on the river islands near by. Finally, the horse corrals were placed, carrying the full weight of a solid steel roof. The depot was finished in January 1896, and during its heyday, handled as many as seventy rail cars a day while housing the small telegraph office.

4. **Commander Mill**
   451 Nelson Street
   The Commander Elevator is one of the most visible buildings in Stillwater's skyline. The elevator, built in 1897 by the Woodward Elevator Company, was originally located at the corner of Main and Nelson Streets. Just six years later the elevator was moved lower to its present site, making way for a new three-story stone building with both open space on the first floor by the Minnesota Flour Mill Company until 1910. The building passed through many hands over the next ten years. The Commander Building purchased the elevator in 1929 and operated it until 1928 when G.T.A. bought out all Commander elevators. The name "Commander" stuck with the elevator, and the building is still known by that name.

5. **Joseph Wolf Brewery**
   232 Main Street South
   In 1869, Martin Wolf established a brewery in Stillwater. Three years later, his brother, Joseph Wolf, along with Joseph Tierman, purchased the site. In 1870, they opened the first steam-powered brewery in Minnesota. Wolf became the sole proprietor in 1872 with a new name, the Empire Brewery. The cases were completed in 1880, and the brewery produced over 40,000 barrels of beer that year. The name changed to the Joseph Wolf Brewing Company in 1881, and for the next two decades, the company flourished, but with the advent of prohibition in 1919, Wolf’s production ceased and the company concentrated on bottling white soda and sparkling water. In 1923, at age 80, Joseph Wolf died suddenly and the family blamed prohibition, claiming it had broken his heart. In 1925, the company shut down and the buildings were rented.

6. **Washington County Courthouse**
   215 Pine Street West
   The Washington County Courthouse is the oldest courthouse in Minnesota. It was designed in the Italianate style by Augustus Knight of St. Paul. When it opened in 1878, the county was facing a booming business in the lumber industry. The courthouse reflected the county’s wealth and overlooked the city from atop Zions Hill. When the county officials moved to the new Washington County Government Center in 1979, efforts began to restore the structure. The historic courthouse is still in operation and serves as a venue for community and private events.

7. **National Guard Armory**
   135 Chester Street
   The National Guard Armory was built in 1924. Stillwater has a long tradition with the National Guard, and after World War I, the city pressed for a new building. Oscar Lang, a well-known Minneapolis architect, designed the hall. It was used not just for military training, but also for public events, sports, and concerts.

8. **Post Office**
   120 Myrtle Street
   Stillwater’s post office moved between several locations during the nineteenth century before the county was facing a booming business in the lumber industry. The courthouse reflected the county’s wealth and overlooked the city from atop Zions Hill. When the county officials moved to the new Washington County Government Center in 1979, efforts began to restore the structure. The historic courthouse is still in operation and serves as a venue for community and private events.

9. **Lowell Inn**
   105 and 107 W. First Street
   The Lowell Inn, named for Stillwater entrepreneur Elmore Lowell, was built in 1927, designed by architect William J. Guntzmann in the Colonial Revival style. The inn was run for many years by Arthur and Nelle Palmer, former Nelle Jennings; who made the inn a serious destination for its unique furnishings and excellent food. When a fire ravaged the inn in 1930, it wrote, “Through it all could be seen the fine hand of a woman of extraordinary good taste.” A portrait of Nelle hangs in the George Washington Room.

10. **Staples Sawmill**
    215 Main Street North
    The mill was built in 1898 by Seth Sawyer and Adnah Heaton. It was purchased in 1858 by Isaac Staples. He was a powerful lumberman known in the St. Croix River Valley during the logging boom of the late nineteenth century. Staples arrived in Stillwater from Maine in 1853 as a representative of eastern investors.

11. **Warden’s House**
    115 Main Street South
    The Minnesota Territorial Prison, later known as the Minnesota State Prison, opened in 1856 to 1914. Construction of the prison began in 1856, just one year after Minnesota became a territory. The first wardens, Francis O. Delano, moved into this house, one of the oldest in the state, on April 2, 1853. The prison was well known because it once housed the Younger Brothers, Cole and John, following their failed attempt to rob the First National Bank in Northfield.

12. **Tetralph House**
    108 Main Street South
    When Wisconsin became a state in 1849, there was uncertainty about the legal status of the lands between the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers. On August 26, 1849, a gathering was held at John McKinney’s store in Stillwater. This convention elected Henry Sibley to represent their interests in Congress with the goal being the establishment of the Minnesota Territory. The following year, Congress formally approved cession of the territory, extending from the new state of Wisconsin on the east to the Minnesota River on the west.

13. **Lumberman’s Exchange**
    220 Water Street South
    The Lumberman’s Exchange Building was constructed in 1913, during the boom years of logging on the St. Croix River. It was built by the first modern business block in the city and equipped with modern plumbing, electricity, and an elevator, one of the first in the state. Its early tenants included logging and lumbering firms.

Downtown Stillwater Walking Tour map
obtained funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to scan nearly 3,000 historic building permits issued between 1886 and 1944. Accessible through the Stillwater Library’s Minnesota Reflections page, the permits shed light on early development history of Stillwater’s oldest structures. Often in combination with digitized Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, city staff and property owners use these to guide structural modification decisions, such as whether or not to recreate a now-missing front porch, or to better understand the historic use and nature of additions and alterations.

While all public education activities have been placed on the City’s website, the HPC’s education and outreach efforts are far from over. In 2018 the HPC updated the Historic Resources chapter of the City’s Comprehensive Plan (Comp Plan), the City’s guiding document for community development and growth. The draft 2040 Comp Plan outlines a specific objective to “promote educational outreach and engagement opportunities related to historic preservation, including the cultural values and economic benefits of historic preservation.” The Plan specifically states the HPC will:

- Continue to expand current public education measures, including videos and podcasts, brochures, walking tours, and interpretive exhibits;
- Digitize existing historic resource inventory data (approximately 2,000 properties) and integrate all records within the HPC website;
- Expand the Commission’s use of online web mapping applications such as ArcGIS StoryMaps.

The HPC and its staff have begun to move forward with the use of new technologies. While staff has begun using Esri’s StoryMaps platform to showcase its historic preservation planning areas, HHLS structures, and audio-visual walking tours, a significant amount of map data is based on links
to the existing HHLSP website. Progress on this work has stalled as, given technological changes since the HHLSP was developed, the HPC must update the HHLSP website by the end of this year. It is anticipated, however, the updated (if not new) website is expected to serve as a starting point for information on all of the City’s historic resources - whether surveyed or officially designated or not. The website is expected to pull together existing survey information, HHLSP information, historic photographs, and archived building permit records together to give a more complete picture of the development of individual structures and neighborhoods throughout Stillwater.

The City has made a long-term commitment to preserving its cultural history. A Preserve America Community with an active HPC, the City understands and values its role in safeguarding the community heritage for future generations. However, as a relatively small city with a part-time staff member serving the HPC, Stillwater also struggles at times with ensuring that preservation is fully integrated within city planning and development and understood by the general public. The HPC recognized that outreach and education efforts are often perceived as work that would be nice to do instead of work that is critical to its central responsibilities. For these reasons, the HPC undertook these multifaceted outreach and education projects as a means of demonstrating to the public how preservation connects to existing community values and brings historic preservation into the mainstream.

**LINKS TO MATERIALS CITED IN THE ARTICLE**


City’s YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/CityofStillwaterMN

Walking Tour Brochure: http://www.ci.stillwater.mn.us/vertical/sites/%7B5BF821C140-4887-99440411EEFD%7D/uploads/stillwater_11x17%28flipped%29.pdf

Minnesota Reflections: http://cdn.16022.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/spl

City’s Website: https://www.ci.stillwater.mn.us/preservationcommission