



## The Hilltop Review

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Volume 12  
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 7

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December 2019

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# A Village Comes to Life: The Interpretation of Henry Ford's Greenfield Village

*By Claire E. Herhold*

**Abstract:** Of all American living history sites, Greenfield Village, in Dearborn, Michigan, is one of the most interesting. Founded by Henry Ford and opened in 1929, Greenfield Village consists of 90 acres of nearly 100 historic buildings, all moved to the site from around the country and reassembled in a vague village formation. Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, the site is not historically significant and represents no one geographic location or time period. While in keeping with Ford's vision of celebrating small-town life and the humble origins of many great thinkers and innovators, this structure has presented challenges for both the staff and the public to settle on a particular interpretive theme. When combined with the more universal criticisms regarding training, equipment, and messaging, these challenges make Greenfield Village a veritable microcosm of the strengths and weaknesses of living history interpretation.

The history of interpretive programming at Greenfield Village demonstrates that weaknesses commonly criticized by academic historians are not inherent in living history programming. In fact, well-educated and trained park staffers saw living history as the solution to these problems and to finally find a way to unify Greenfield Village's unique structure under a cohesive and effective interpretive theme. The 1982 implementation of the Edison/Saltbox project was a direct response to the most current scholarship on museum education and represented a continued dialogue with other open-air history museums. More recent attempts to improve the interpretation of African American history at Greenfield Village echo similar strategies at Colonial Williamsburg and respond directly to calls within the academy to address the prevalence of nostalgia in presentations of the past. While Greenfield Village's programming continues to face the funding and staffing problems that plague living history programs nationwide, its story should remind scholars that nostalgia and antiquarianism are not problems inherent to living history.

Within the discipline of history, living history interpretation occupies a unique place as one of the most recognizable yet understudied forms of history education.<sup>28</sup> At open-air history museums across the country, including Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation, Old Sturbridge Village, Conner Prairie, and Greenfield Village, costumed educators interact with the public in formal and informal settings by leading tours, demonstrating historical crafts, and reenacting events. These programs are iconic in the American historical imagination but have attracted little formal recognition from public history scholars.

The portrait that emerges from a review of academic literature concerning living history interpretation is largely pessimistic. Nearly all studies acknowledge that living history offers opportunities for audience engagement and participatory experiences that remain unmatched by other educational techniques. Early studies nearly unanimously applauded the possibilities for the interpretation of “bottom-up” social history inherent in recreating the daily environments of everyday people.<sup>29</sup> However, more recent scholars also express deep reservations about the historical accuracy and integrity of the material interpreted at such sites.<sup>30</sup> Working museum educators and interdisciplinary scholars – such as those coming from anthropology or performance studies – tend to express more comfort in the ambiguity inherent in the informal interactions of staff and visitors.<sup>31</sup> Academic historians, by contrast, are far more concerned by the potential

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<sup>28</sup> While some practitioners use the phrase “living history” to denote hobby reenactors, who have no ties to formal training or educational institutions, this paper will use the term exclusively to refer to professional educators, whether full-time or seasonal, who work at cultural history parks and museums.

<sup>29</sup> See Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984); Warren Leon, “A Broader Vision: Exhibits That Change the Way Visitors Look at the Past,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> See Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008); Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt, “Living-History Museums,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> See Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007); Scott Magelssen and Rhona Justice-Malloy, *Enacting History* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011); Stephen Eddy Snow, *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimoth Plantation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

perpetuation of misinformation and nostalgic views of the past by underfunded and untrained interpreters.

Of all American living history sites, Greenfield Village, in Dearborn, Michigan, is one of the most interesting. Founded by Henry Ford and opened in 1929, Greenfield Village consists of 90 acres of nearly 100 historic buildings, all moved to the site from around the country and reassembled in a vague village formation. Unlike Colonial Williamsburg, the site is not historically significant, and the village represents no single geographic location or time period. While in keeping with Ford's vision of celebrating small-town life and the humble origins of many great thinkers and innovators, this structure presents challenges for both the staff and the public to settle on a particular, interpretive theme. When combined with the more universal criticisms regarding training, equipment and messaging, these challenges make Greenfield Village a veritable microcosm of the strengths and weaknesses of living history interpretation.

While Greenfield Village's interpretive programming began as soon as the gates opened to Ford's guests in 1929, the village did not adopt its now-iconic living history programs until the early 1980s. For this reason, Greenfield Village has escaped the academic attention received by Colonial Williamsburg. Academic examinations of the site either end with Ford's death or focus exclusively on the preservation of individual buildings. Jessie Swigger's 2014 study, *"History is Bunk": Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village*, provides an excellent, in-depth case study of Greenfield Village as an institution.<sup>32</sup> Swigger traces the Village's growth from Ford's brainchild to a history "attraction" on par with Colonial Williamsburg. However, Swigger's focus is on the relationship between park administration and academic historians. Due to the preservation of extensive visitor surveys preserved at the Edison Institute, Swigger was able to include much more of the visitor's perspective and reaction to the interpretation, but the public she was most concerned with was the local population of Dearborn, Michigan. In contrast to Swigger's work, this paper attempts to analyze the methods by which village staff incorporated recent scholarship: namely, the training and equipping of interpreters and the adoption of living history techniques.

Ford's vision for Greenfield Village is a study in contradictions; it is both an endorsement of the strengths of living history interpretation and an example of its weaknesses. After fifty years of directionless interpretation, Greenfield Village finally embraced living history in the early 1980s, at the very period when practitioners were working to reclaim the technique from nostalgic reenactors and

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<sup>32</sup> Jessie Swigger, *"History is Bunk": Assembling the Past at Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

antiquarians. Greenfield Village's story demonstrates that it is not living history alone that is beset by untrained staff, nostalgic obsession, and misinformation and that the strengths first identified by scholars in the 1980s can still overcome those weaknesses.

### **Ford's Vision**

While now more commonly known independently by their separate names, The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village are actually part of the same entity, the Edison Institute. Named for Ford's dear friend, Thomas Alva Edison, the Institute was intended to resemble three gears with interlocking teeth: an indoor museum of design and technology, an outdoor museum displaying how those technologies were used in everyday life, and a school system, modeled on Ford's own one-room schoolhouse education.

Ford particularly believed in the preservation of birthplace and residential sites. His first experiments with historic preservation and education began in 1919 when he saved his childhood home from the pathway of a new road by moving it two hundred feet. This, however, was no mere rescue mission; soon, Ford was recreating the home's original windmill, sweeping the property for material culture and refurnishing the interior according to his childhood memories.<sup>33</sup>

Ford's approach to historic preservation was not unique.<sup>34</sup> While its philosophy changed throughout the late nineteenth century, the historic house movement was a ubiquitous American phenomenon. The most famous and influential preservation project was the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, founded in 1853; other homes of the "founding fathers" attracted similar levels of interest as America celebrated its centennial. By the turn of the century, Progressive Party activists emphasized the traditional American home as a method of assimilating Eastern European immigrants to American domestic life.<sup>35</sup> Ford had more in common with these Progressives than the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. The birthplaces and residences Ford wanted to preserve were not the palaces of so-called "great men." Rather, Ford wanted to celebrate the humble origins of a new class of great men – the inventors, makers, and doers he believed were driving America forward.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Swigger, 28.

<sup>34</sup> See Seth Bruggeman, *Born in the U.S.A.: Birth, Commemoration, and American Public Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Swigger, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Ford Museum Staff, *Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1972), 6.

The perception that Ford was ignorant of American history is widespread, which is based primarily on his famous proclamation that “history is more or less bunk,” reported by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1916.<sup>37</sup> In the resulting libel case against the *Tribune*, Ford’s abysmal performance on American history questions supported claims that he was deeply uneducated. As Ford doggedly explained for years after the trial, he only objected to history as it was then written and practiced, which excluded the histories of agriculture, technology, invention, and, most importantly, the common man. It is possible to see Ford as a burgeoning social historian who believed that the built environment, material culture, and lived experiences of everyday people warranted the same historical study as leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

On the other hand, the history that Ford sought to write instead was no less nostalgic or antiquarian. In his study of Ford’s public image, David E. Nye wrote, “The single most important function of [Ford’s project], however, was to reassure Americans that industrialism was in fundamental harmony with their vision of a developing pastoral utopia.”<sup>38</sup> By filling Greenfield Village with both industrial buildings, like the reconstructed Menlo Park laboratory complex and earlier, more pastoral structures with clear links to American popular culture, like the Wayside Inn of Longfellow’s poetry, Ford created a world in which these two ideals of progress and nostalgia could exist simultaneously.<sup>39</sup> Slowly, Ford’s collecting became a mania, including buildings and all their furnishings. Ford even turned down an opportunity to work at Colonial Williamsburg on the same sort of preservation project, believing that the complete freedom from geographic and temporal constraints at Greenfield Village would allow him “to reconstruct the past on his own terms.”<sup>40</sup> By 1925, the plan for the Edison Institute was clearly formed, and, in 1929, it was formally christened by Edison himself.

Although technically open, the museum and the village were both unfinished and, barring special permission, remained closed to visitors until 1933. The visitors who were admitted were not allowed to wander the village on their own, as visitors do today. Instead, in groups of 25, they were led by student guides from the Henry Ford Trade School or local high schools. After the museum and village opened to all visitors in 1933, this group of 150 guides became much more formalized. Guides were assigned to sections of the village

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<sup>37</sup> Swigger, 27.

<sup>38</sup> David E. Nye, *Henry Ford: “Ignorant Idealist”* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Swigger, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Swigger, 35.

and were responsible for learning the assigned material for those buildings.<sup>41</sup> Early manuals for this first group of guides emphasize, with almost spiritual reverence, the presence of Ford and Edison. For example, the 1929 manual for the Menlo Park area describes the original objects within the buildings as authentic “relics” and emphasizes that they have been placed “in approximately the same places they occupied when used by Mr. Edison.”<sup>42</sup> By the early 1930s, park staff were beginning to write manuals for each individual building or cluster of buildings in the village, distributing one manual to the guide, keeping one in the museum library, and one in the building for reference. Some of these manuals included floor plans and anecdotal information about the artifacts in the buildings and how they were used.<sup>43</sup>

While Ford envisioned the village as the place to see the artifacts exhibited in the museum in use, guides at Greenfield Village did not actually employ living history techniques until the early 1980s. The closest that early village interpretation came to living history was in the crafts demonstration area. William A. Simonds, Manager of Guides and Public Relations, wrote that “these shops revive industries that are fast vanishing from the American scene. Others combine crafts with commerce, or commemorate a historical personage.”<sup>44</sup> Students at the Edison Institute schools were given hands-on lessons in agriculture at the village’s working farms, but these demonstrations and experiences were not open to visitors.<sup>45</sup>

The guide manuals from this early period reflect Ford’s ambivalence towards the professional standards of the museum field. Unlike the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Ford did not hire professional architects to move or restore the buildings he brought to Greenfield Village. Likewise, the only guides at the village with professional experience were the crafts demonstrators. Guide

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<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey C. Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage: The Building and Growth of Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, 1929-1979* (Dearborn, MI: The Henry Ford Museum Press, 1979), 76-77, 89.

<sup>42</sup> “E.I.T. and Village Guide Book; ca. 1929,” Box 1, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>43</sup> “Cotswold Group, ca. 1936,” Box 1, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>44</sup> William Adams Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1938), 189.

Later guide manuals, like the 1966 Guide Reference Manual for the Village Tour, stipulate that interpretation of machinery, equipment or workshops (i.e. the blacksmith’s forge) is left to the craftsperson alone, unless they are not present. The reader presumes that this interpretation would be verbal and not demonstrative. “Village Tour, 1966,” Box 13, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>45</sup> Simonds, *Henry Ford and Greenfield Village*, 90.

manuals do not describe the actual practice of guiding and talking to visitors until the late 1930s. Nevertheless, those manuals' instructions are surprisingly aligned with modern interpretation standards. For example, the following introduction, standard in manuals of the 1930s and early 1940s, emphasizes the enthusiasm and flexibility of the guide:

This talk is not intended to be memorized and given before each group; rather it is to guide you in organizing your own talk from the material presented. To keep your talk interesting, you must be interested in what you are saying. Keep your interest fresh by rearranging and reorganizing your talk frequently – use new phrases and new material. On later pages you will find other representative talks by former guides.<sup>46</sup>

Decades before professional interpreters recommended using a fundamentally different approach with groups of children, Greenfield Village manuals differentiated between tours for adults and for children of different age groups.<sup>47</sup> After the late 1930s, guide manuals also ended with a short quiz for guides to test their own knowledge and a signature sheet to certify that they had passed the quiz before working in the building.<sup>48</sup> Women's names do not appear on these signature sheets until the mid-1940s; both Henry and Clara Ford resisted using female guides as they were concerned about fraternization among young men and women.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps they should have been more concerned about boredom among the guides, as several manuals served instead as scorecards for regular poker tournaments.<sup>50</sup>

Overall, the material these guides presented did not change substantially during Ford's lifetime. Manuals were often accompanied by "supplements," which were essentially scrapbooks with newspaper clippings documenting the building's move, reconstruction, and dedication, but these were the only additions

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<sup>46</sup> "Ceramic Shop, 1937," Box 1, accession no. 141, "Guide Reference Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>47</sup> "Chapel, Suwanee, Scotch Settlement, and McGuffey Group; 1937," Box 1, accession no. 141, "Guide Reference Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI; Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 76-85.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 76-77.

<sup>50</sup> "Currier Shoe Shop; 1939," Box 5, accession no. 141, "Guide Reference Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.



to the manuals.<sup>51</sup> With Ford so close to the heart of both interpretive techniques and content, his death in 1947 substantially destabilized Village programming and leadership for the next few decades.

### Life after Ford

Far away from Dearborn, Michigan, important changes were afoot for the burgeoning profession known as interpretation. In 1941, writer Freeman Tilden met Newton Drury, the director of the National Park Service. Impressed, Drury named Tilden an administrative assistant and charged him with developing guidelines for public relations and interpretation for the park service.<sup>52</sup> Tilden produced reams of thoughtful material under Drury's guidance, including essays on conservation and pamphlets designed to attract donors. The next director, Conrad Wirth, had larger plans for Tilden and the park service. Wirth believed that interpretation "was at the very heart of the parks' preservation and protection mandate," and assigned Tilden with the task of studying and improving current practices.<sup>53</sup> The manuscript that emerged, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, was recognized as the "Bible" of the fledgling profession almost immediately.

In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden described six principles of good interpretation. These principles emphasize the interpreter as a conduit of communication, rather than an encyclopedia of facts. An interpreter's job, according to Tilden, is to connect a visitor to the resource at hand until they come to understand it and protect it of their own accord. Visitor experience is therefore just as important as the preservation of the resource. Tilden's principles emphasize personal connection, the joy of discovery and understanding, and the importance of provocation over education.

Meanwhile, after Ford's death, administrators at Greenfield Village were struggling to find their feet in a museum studies field that was growing increasingly professionalized and authoritative.<sup>54</sup> During his 1951 visit, the Colonial Williamsburg administrator, Allston Boyer, identified the site's weaknesses: Ford's eclectic vision for the village was not coherent, and rearranging the site would be prohibitively expensive. Boyer suggested that interpretation should focus tightly on Ford as the common thread; that more and better-trained staff members needed to be hired; and that Greenfield Village needed to expand its offerings – both educational and recreational – in order to

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<sup>51</sup> "Wright Brothers Bicycle Shop; ca. 1938," Box 5, accession no. 141, "Guide Reference Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>52</sup> Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Swigger, "*History is Bunk*," 103.

attract a new and larger audience.<sup>55</sup> Village events began in 1951, which included the Country Fair of Yesteryear, the Old Car Festival, the Greenfield Village Turkey Shoot, and a reenactment of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>56</sup>

This reorientation toward friendly and entertaining educational programming changed the duties of the village guides. Large, conducted tours met at the entrance to Greenfield Village, where the guide began with a “dispatch talk,” which asked guests to “try to forget the hustle and bustle of the atomic age and return briefly to the simple, rugged life our forefathers knew.”<sup>57</sup> Village administration also began to professionalize the guide staff, urging them to take pride in their association with The Edison Institute and identify themselves as colleagues in the work of Ford and Edison themselves.<sup>58</sup>

However, the “guides” and “attendants” of Greenfield Village bore little resemblance to the interpreters Freeman Tilden was training for the National Park Service. The two-hour-long village tours were impersonal and offered no structured opportunities for visitor interaction. Occasionally, a guide manual might recommend pointing out a particular anecdote or artifact if the guide knew the group was from Detroit or Ohio, but they usually requested that guides follow the script down to the exact location to stand in each building.<sup>59</sup> The 1966 manual advised guides to “mention Edison statue only if asked or your group will scatter.”<sup>60</sup>

In the late 1970s, guide managers finally began to develop new programs and tours around specific interpretive themes. For a walking tour commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1929 Light’s Golden Jubilee dedication, guides led visitors through the village, demonstrating the development of lighting technology from the colonial period to the twentieth century. This use of an interpretive theme to unite a cohesive and accurate historical narrative with Ford’s early vision for the park exemplified contemporary standards of good interpretation.

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<sup>55</sup> Swigger, 103, 107.

<sup>56</sup> Upward, *A Home for Our Heritage*, 132, 140.

<sup>57</sup> “Village Tours, 1945,” Box 8, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>58</sup> “Greenfield Village Attendant Instruction Book; ca. 1948,” Box 8, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>59</sup> “Village Tour; 1963,” Box 12, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>60</sup> “Village Tour; 1966,” Box 13, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI; “Village Tour, 1968,” Box 14, accession no. 141, “Guide Reference Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

However, the tour relied on non-costumed guides, a lecture format, and limited interactive demonstrations.<sup>61</sup>

Administrators were starting to get curious about visitor preferences and experience in the 1960s and 1970s and rolled out annual visitor surveys during that period. Particularly in the wake of the 1967 Detroit riots, administrators believed that Detroit's reputation was a significant barrier to attracting visitors from out of town.<sup>62</sup> Throughout the surveys, visitors consistently expressed more interest in the residential buildings than the industrial ones and made frequent comparisons to other outdoor living history museums like Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village. Village historian Jessie Swigger summarized:

Visitors also characterized their educational experience based on the appearance of guides and staff. They often encouraged staff to adopt more of a living-history approach. One wrote: 'I think if the guides wore period costumes they would give you more of a feeling that you were back then. Even though your exhibits are from different eras, I would love to see clothing of the different periods.' [...] In general, visitors defined the ideal educational experience as one that re-created an atmosphere of the past.<sup>63</sup>

Park administrators were listening. As Bicentennial fervor died down, Greenfield Village began to invest heavily in its most ambitious interpretive project yet.

### **Back to the Future**

By the time Greenfield Village responded to this pressure to provide an immersive, interactive visitor experience, living history interpretation was a long-established technique in practice at Colonial Williamsburg, Plimoth Plantation, and Old Sturbridge Village, among others.<sup>64</sup> In Michigan, there were two other historic sites employing living history on a large scale: Mackinac State Historic Parks (MSHP) and Crossroads Village. At MSHP, living history interpretation began in 1958 with costumed interpreters leading visitors through

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<sup>61</sup> "Anniversary Tour, 1979," Box 16, accession no. 141, "Guide Reference Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>62</sup> Swigger, 118.

<sup>63</sup> Swigger, 136-137.

<sup>64</sup> Jaclyn Millichamp, "Mediated Histories: Representations of Nineteenth-Century American Life at Greenfield Village and Crossroads Village" (master's thesis, Wayne State University, 2014), 12-30. This thesis, while a valuable comparison of the founding principles of the two villages, does not discuss programming or interpretation at either site.

Fort Mackinac, demonstrating musket- and cannon-firing procedures.<sup>65</sup> However, MSHP was not a nineteenth-century village site and did not interpret agricultural or industrial history. Just seventy miles north of Dearborn, however, Genesee County Parks and Recreation managed a new site, Crossroads Village and Huckleberry Railroad, which depicted a small, agricultural village of the nineteenth century using living history.

Proposed in 1968 by the Flint Farmers Club, Crossroads Village's vision was quite similar to that of Greenfield Village and Ford. By assembling a village from buildings throughout the county, park staff could represent the agricultural beginnings of Flint, early industries (especially lumber), and the roots of General Motors. In 1973, the project was designated as the official bicentennial project for the city, a designation which secured significant funding from the Mott Foundation. The two sites shared a strong physical resemblance and an emphasis on the interpretation of transportation, especially after Crossroads Village acquired a narrow-gauge railroad that ran through the village and a paddleboat on nearby Mott Lake.<sup>66</sup>

The programming at Crossroads Village was an inspiration for new interpretive practices at Greenfield Village, as shown by the minutes, memos, and correspondence of the living history investigation committee (known as the "Domestic Activities Task Force"). For example, on August 25, 1981, Candace T. Matelic, manager of Interpretive Programs at Greenfield Village, sent out a call for staff members interested in traveling to Crossroads Village to meet with their director, Dennis Zawol. This investigatory trip truly marked the beginning of living history programming at Greenfield Village.

For most of the twentieth century, interpretation (under many other names) had proceeded at Greenfield Village without any connection to the best practices of this growing field. Matelic's presence at the Village, however, marked a new shift in interpretation. Well-trained with several years of experience at Iowa's Living History Farms, Matelic was deeply familiar with the existing literature and had even published herself on living history museums throughout America and Europe. Interpreter manuals under Matelic's direction finally mentioned Tilden's principles and referenced publications by leading living history scholar, Jay Anderson. Each manual included a suggested bibliography for further reading, which listed new periodical publications and conference presentations from the Organization of American Historians (OAH), the Association for Farm, Living History and Agricultural Museums (AFLHAM), and

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<sup>65</sup> David A. Armour, *100 Years at Mackinac: A Centennial History of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1895-1995* (Mackinac Island, MI: Mackinac State Historic Parks, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Millichamp, "Mediated Histories," 54-63.

the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH).<sup>67</sup> Matelic's planning committee was determined to use living history scholarship to combat the nostalgia in both Ford's vision and the visitors' expectations. In a planning document titled, "Domestic Life as an Interpretive Theme," they argued:

Many visitors arrive with preconceived notions about what life was like 'back then in the good ole days', referring to the continuum of 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century life in the entire United States. Concepts such as time, regional influences, and variations in lifestyle based on occupation or economics are difficult to communicate. It is also tempting for visitors and us to over simplify and romanticize domestic life, especially through the site itself. It does not help that there are oodles of 'cutesy' 'period' domestic restorations and recreations around the country. [...]  
We encounter many of these problems with the domestic structures in Greenfield Village as presently furnished. Yet this situation can be corrected.<sup>68</sup>

By early 1982, the Crossroads Village field trip and staff discussions birthed a tentative plan, which was known in park correspondence as the "Edison/Saltbox Project." The Edison Homestead (home of Thomas Edison's grandparents) and the Saltbox House (an eighteenth-century New England farm now known as the Daggett Farm) would become living history sites, staffed by costumed interpreters demonstrating foodways and handcrafts appropriate to their era. This new program would have a new interpretive theme: "Domestic Life."

In DOMESTIC LIFE we find a common denominator with our visitors regardless of age, background, sex or race – that shared common experience which can serve as an interpretive communication base. In this sense, it is an easy place to start to interpret one modernization story. [...] We can explore the social consequences of technological progress and mechanization through the changes that occurred in the daily, weekly and seasonal routine of a household. WE can address how these changes affected the roles of men, women, parents and children.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "Domestic Activities Manual 1982 (1 of 3)," Box 2, accession no. 168 "Interpreter Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "Domestic Activities Manual 1982 (1 of 3)," Box 2, accession no. 168 "Interpreter Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

The Edison and Saltbox homes were chosen because it was possible to interpret them in eras one hundred years apart: 1769 and 1869. Finally, the eclecticism of Ford's vision would instead be a meaningful contrast that had an educational purpose. The depiction of the forward march of technology and progress he envisioned could serve an appropriate, well-researched interpretive theme.

Adopting a living history program like the Edison/Saltbox Project was no easy task. The committee chose a core group of 20-25 interpreters to be fitted for costumes, trained in domestic demonstrations, and to adopt a far different type of interpretation than they were used to. Interpreters and "crafts staff" would be trained for both the Edison and Saltbox homes to familiarize them with the similarities and differences between the two houses, which formed the core of their interpretive theme. "Activating" the houses also involved the Maintenance and Grounds department, and the task force prepared for what they called "major negotiations" over building adaptations. For example, were furniture and artifact reproductions necessary or could originals be retained? What barriers could come down in exhibits? How much could visitors touch? Where were modern conveniences like refrigerators and telephones needed? What must remain hidden from visitors?<sup>70</sup>

Training for this special team was done in May and June of 1982, and the team met regularly with Matelic to evaluate the program. Costuming, always a major concern in living history due to both its power in interpretation and its financial demands for purchasing and maintenance, was the subject of a June 24 memo to staff: "With regards to clothing, make sure anything you wear is from period clothing [a department of the Edison Institute] and is right for that house. Please don't wear aprons or other articles of clothing of your own or from another project. At the end of the day, make sure you leave the aprons at the site since there is currently a shortage."<sup>71</sup> The staff meeting agenda from July 8 asked for a discussion of new approaches to cooking demonstrations, daily chore assignments, and staff scheduling. By the September 10 meeting, the team began evaluating the program from both staff and visitor viewpoints, planning for autumn craft workshops, and putting together recommendations for the 1983 season.<sup>72</sup>

Self-reflection, current scholarship, and off-site visits were constant themes of the early years of Greenfield Village's living history program. The 1983 manual incorporates Tilden's principles, guidelines for historic sites from

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<sup>70</sup> "Domestic Activities Manual 1982 (1 of 3)," Box 2, accession no. 168 "Interpreter Manuals," Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

AASLH, discussions of communication theory and visitor needs, and worksheets for interpreters to practice developing themes on their own.<sup>73</sup> 1983 also marked the introduction of a staff newsletter called “Modern Times.” The February 1983 issue describes an “interpreter training trip” the team took the previous November to Colonial Williamsburg. There the group split into groups focusing on different aspects of living history: crafts programs, period clothing, first-person techniques, and agriculture. Throughout subsequent issues of “Modern Times,” each smaller group wrote a report to the team on what they had learned from working with and interviewing Colonial Williamsburg staff. The Domestic Life group summed up their report by writing, “Team members agreed the trip offered an excellent opportunity to gather new ideas and to rediscover previously overlooked strengths in our own program.”<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, the interpreter library continued to grow with new publications regarding historic crafts, clothing, and interpretive techniques.<sup>75</sup> The 1984 Introductory Manual noted that all interpretive material would be in line with the Edison Institute Curriculum Committee Report of 1981 and that “All [historical] information will be based on the most up-to-date research and documentation available; references to contributing sources will be included as necessary and/or appropriate; all material presented here will be passed on to the curatorial department for approval before printing.”<sup>76</sup>

This rigorous study laid the groundwork for the most important development in Greenfield Village’s living history interpretation program: the donation, move, restoration, and interpretation of the Firestone Farm. Now the centerpiece of the Village’s “Working Farms” Historic District, the Firestone Farm was first introduced in 1983 as an incoming gift. In March 1983, staff member Peter Cousins noted, “We are hoping that ways will be found to interpret that process [the move of the farm] by inviting each of our 1984 visitors to become a ‘sidewalk superintendent’ on the project.”<sup>77</sup> In the interpreter manual in use from 1987-1990, programming at the farm is described thus: “On a seven-acre chunk of Greenfield Village, two horses, six head of cattle, 40 sheep and costumed interpreters recreate the activities of 19<sup>th</sup>-century farmers Benjamin and

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<sup>73</sup> “Introductory Manual Spring, 1983 (2<sup>nd</sup> Revision) (1 of 2),” Box 3, accession no. 168 “Interpreter Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “Interpretation articles – 1983,” Box 3, accession no. 168 “Interpreters/Presenters Training Manuals and Materials,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>76</sup> “Introductory Manual Feb-May 1984 (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Revision) (1 of 2),” Box 4, accession no. 168 “Interpreter Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>77</sup> “Introductory Manual Spring, 1983 (2<sup>nd</sup> Revision) (1 of 2),” Box 3, accession no. 168 “Interpreter Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

Catherine Firestone. The living history program at the Firestone Farm reproduces—from shoveling manure to hoeing corn and baking pies—the everyday life of a working farm of the early 1880s.”<sup>78</sup> Sometime in the mid-1990s, the Firestone Farm totally replaced the Edison homestead as the focus of 19<sup>th</sup>-century living history at the village. While it’s not clear from archival material when that shift took place, it is clear that the development of the farm property, the purchase and care of livestock, and the training of staff in new domestic skills represent a major investment by Greenfield Village administrators and likely limited the village’s overall capacity to support living history in other buildings.<sup>79</sup>

### **Today’s Village**

Interpreters working today at Greenfield Village still struggle with the legacy of the site’s founder, Henry Ford, and his vision for what the village could be. For example, the appendix of Frequently Asked Questions in the Historic Presenter Training Manual for the Ford home offers suggestions for dealing with visitor questions about Ford’s well-known anti-Semitism:

We’re sorry to say that this was indeed true, although he did have some Jewish colleagues that he respected. [...] Henry Ford had an utterly crazy belief in a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. [...] Even in his own day, Ford’s ideas never really took hold in the United States. Henry Ford’s son and grandson did much to transform Ford Motor Company into a more tolerant organization, and to establish ties with the Jewish community. But unfortunately this legacy lives on. Today this kind of behavior by someone of Henry Ford’s stature would be highly inconceivable.<sup>80</sup>

Ford’s privileging of the stories of innovative white men in choosing the buildings he moved to Greenfield Village also presents a challenge. Initially, Ford collected the Hermitage plantation’s slave cabins as a novelty. He considered the slave

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<sup>78</sup> “Interpreter/Presenter Training Manuals and Material – 1987-1990,” Box 4, accession no. 168 “Interpreter Manuals,” Edison Institute Records, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>79</sup> The number of interpreter manuals collected by the Edison Institute archives taper off through the 1980s and stop completely in the 1990s. Current interpreter manuals are available in the interpreter library at the Benson Ford Research Center, but the gap from the late 1980s through the 2000s complicates the tracking of the living history program through that period.

<sup>80</sup> “Historic Presenter Training Manual – Ford Home,” Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.



cabins significant only because they were built of brick, and therefore more comfortable than quarters on other plantations. Today, the Hermitage cabins are viewed as a “sensitive” site for interpretation, partly because they do not fit the mold of the other buildings Ford collected. They are not interpreted with living history techniques like the nearby Susquehanna plantation: one cabin is inconsistently staffed by non-costumed volunteers, and the other employs a pre-recorded sound system.<sup>81</sup>

Outside the crafts demonstration area, which is still a major emphasis in the interpretation of industry at the village, the majority of living history is done within a group of buildings designated as “Foodways and Domestic Life Programs.” These buildings include the Daggett Farmhouse (formerly known as the Saltbox), Edison Homestead, Ford Home, Firestone Farm, and Giddings Family Home.<sup>82</sup> Period clothing guidelines are in place for the Firestone Farm, J.R. Jones General Store, Cohen’s Millinery, and Daggett Farm, but are lax for pieces that are notoriously expensive or heavy-wearing for living history interpreters: namely footwear, stockings, and eyeglasses.<sup>83</sup> Not every building designated as “staffed” has an interpreter every day. Rather, Greenfield Village heavily relies on the availability of volunteers and part-time employees.<sup>84</sup>

While the Firestone Farm is not the only building within Greenfield Village that utilizes living history interpretation, it is the most famous and the most consistently staffed. In descriptions of the village, the farm is used synonymously with living history or to stand for the village in general.<sup>85</sup> The manual for the farm emphasizes the connection of the programming there to the mission of the Edison Institute, and the privileging of interpretation over the daily chores and demands of farm work:

...at The Henry Ford, we address the stories that matter in people’s lives.

We help people understand that they are a part of a dynamic history, a history that, everyday [sic], they help shape and develop.

We strive to inspire, challenge, and entertain our visitors.

On Firestone Farm, we uphold these principles. We engage and inspire every visitor, regardless of circumstances. Yes, Firestone

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<sup>81</sup> “Hermitage Presenter Training Manual,” Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>82</sup> “Edison Homestead Training Manual,” Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>83</sup> “Historic Presenter’s Period Clothing Guidelines GV/HRM,” Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>84</sup> “Volunteer Manual,” Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

<sup>85</sup> Paul Cohen and Brenda Cohen, “Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum,” *Journal of College Science Teaching* 22, no. 3 (Dec 1992/Jan 1993), 199.

Farm is a working farm, and yes, we have work that must be done. Animals must be fed. The chicken coop must be cleaned. However, none of this work matters if we're not talking to the visitors. Presenting is our first and most important job on the Farm. If you burnt all of dinner black and it took you an hour to milk the cow, the day is still a success if you welcomed and inspired every visitor that walked onto the site.<sup>86</sup>

While this introduction captures the enthusiasm and excitement of the very first living history team in 1982, it nevertheless separates the work of living history from engagement with the visitors, where once they were inseparable elements of the communication process. It is this separation that causes living history techniques to seem like a gimmick or play rather than a tool. The Firestone Farm's notoriety has enormous potential to publicize the effectiveness of living history, but this programming must return to the scholarship it believed to be viable in the first place.

### **Conclusion**

Ford's vision for Greenfield Village presents a conundrum to any museum professional or public historian working today. On the one hand, Ford dreamed of an open-air museum that would represent the built environment, material culture and daily life of the average American citizen, an approach that is still acknowledged today as the greatest strength of open-air history museums. On the other hand, Ford's vision privileged the stories of white men who rose from humble beginnings to achieve greatness, many of whom were close personal friends. The very eclectic nature of Greenfield Village ensures that all cohesive interpretive themes must still relate somewhat to Ford's vision and worldview, rather than the daily life he sought to preserve. This nostalgic, patriotic, and paternal narrative represents the greatest weakness most often identified at open-air history museums.

However, the history of interpretive programming at Greenfield Village demonstrates that these weaknesses are not due to the use of living history programming, as academic historians often insist. They existed well before living history interpretation was implemented at the village. Well-educated and trained park staffers saw living history as the solution to these problems and to finally find a way to unify Greenfield Village's unique structure under a cohesive and

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<sup>86</sup> "Firestone Farm Domestic Programs Training Manual," Interpreter Library, Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, MI.

effective interpretive theme. The 1982 implementation of the Edison/Saltbox project was a direct response to the most current scholarship on museum education and represented a continued dialogue with other open-air history museums. While living history interpretation has decreased in size and professionalism at the site, the Firestone Farm remains arguably the most recognizable and popular attraction at the village. Greenfield Village's programming continues to face the funding and staffing problems that plague living history programs nationwide; its story should remind scholars that nostalgia and antiquarianism are not problems inherent to living history. Living history was once seen as a solution to those problems at Greenfield Village and it can be again with the same dedication to collaboration, investment, and training.

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