Why Take a Trip to Bountiful—Won’t Anaheim Do?

THE VALUE OF THE GENUINE ARTIFACT IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

By Richard West Sellars

In *The Trip to Bountiful*, the widely acclaimed movie based on Horton Foote’s play, the elderly Mrs. Carrie Watts (Geraldine Page) is determined to visit the farm where she grew up near Bountiful, Texas. Her indifferent son and daughter-in-law repeatedly prevent her from making the trip from Houston, claiming that she is not well enough. But Mrs. Watts finally escapes on a bus to Bountiful, and through the kindness of the local sheriff she is driven to her old home nearby, a now-abandoned farmstead. In the film’s emotional climax, she sees for one last time the place where she lived as a child.

Now suppose the sheriff had said, “Sorry, Mrs. Watts, I’m going in the opposite direction. But I’ll be glad to take you to this other farm about ten miles away. It looks a lot like the place where you grew up—why, the house has been furnished with period pieces. And there are even costumed interpreters to tell you what it was like in the old days! That should do, shouldn’t it?” Not at all. If Mrs. Watts had been taken to the other farm, she surely would have been deeply disappointed, because it was not the genuine place connected with her past.

We each have our own Bountifuls tied to personal memories, even hallowed grounds, such as a family gravesite. Such places are likely to be relegated to mere family history. Yet some places, whether slowly or suddenly, take on significance for more than one person, family, or community. In the United States, the National Park Service (NPS) has by far the greatest responsibility to care for important remnants of the nation’s Bountifuls, many of which elicit intense feelings and beliefs imbued with patriotism, regionalism, ethnic pride, or filiopietism. Inevitably, in presenting these sites to the
public, the NPS has to tread a fine line, respecting visitors’ own interpretations while emphasizing historical accuracy. But leaving that delicate balancing act aside, in preserving the past, the NPS must also repeatedly address questions of authenticity.

For instance, the original chair used in 1787 by George Washington during the Constitutional Convention is on exhibit in Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia. Known as the “Rising Sun” chair for the design carved into its top rail, it can be seen in the Assembly Room of Independence Hall, where the Constitution was written. The chair is the only piece of furniture unquestionably documented to have been in the Assembly Room at the time of the convention. Visitors are told the chair is original and that it was used by Washington. It has extraordinary qualities that the period pieces and reproductions in that room do not and cannot legitimately possess. The Rising Sun chair is perceived, valued, cared for, and presented in a special way. It is different. It was there.

Near Hodgenville, Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park features a small log cabin identified decades after Lincoln’s assassination as his authentic birthplace. The cabin (not to be confused with some other log cabins associated with Lincoln’s life story) is enclosed in an imposing granite and marble neoclassical temple—a memorial building erected in the early twentieth century by the Lincoln Farm Association, whose members were fervent admirers of the martyred president and wished to honor “Father Abraham,” the revered Emancipator. The cornerstone was laid by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909, and the building was dedicated in 1911 by President William Howard Taft. Today, however, this site’s hallowedness is limited, if indeed it endures at all. How did this happen?

To begin with, our generation is more cynical than were our ancestors: Lincoln is no longer “Father Abraham” (and as memorials, one might add, temples are not in vogue). Moreover, highly credible testimony given early in the twentieth century disputed the enshrined log cabin’s historical authenticity—its ties to Lincoln. But this was ignored by those determined to have the real thing—the True Cross—and when the NPS assumed control of the birthplace park in 1933, it too was intent upon having the True Cross. Thus, the cabin continued to be portrayed as the genuine birthplace, even in the face of mounting contrary evidence researched by scholars, one of whom was employed at the national historical park itself.

The park’s initial concession was to begin describing the cabin as the “traditional” birthplace.

To complicate matters, if there had been any genuine Lincoln logs in the cabin, they would have been hopelessly mixed up with logs said to be from the birthplace cabin of another Kentucky native—Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. This curious fate came about when the supposed cabins of the two opposing Civil War leaders were disassembled for shipment to fairs for joint exhibition, as well as stored between exhibitions. What is more, the owners combined the logs from both cabins into one large cabin, and for a brief time exhibited it as the Lincoln and Davis Cabin. All this led to confusion over which logs (assuming they were not all bogus) came from the Lincoln cabin, and which were from the Davis cabin. Eventually, the logs spent extended time stored on Long Island.

Further research published in 2001 determined that the cabin almost certainly did not consist of Lincoln logs. And in 2004, when some cabin logs were sampled for scientific dating through tree-ring analysis, none proved old enough to have a connection to Lincoln’s birth. The NPS finally arrived at a suitable compromise by referring to the birthplace cabin as a “Symbolic Cabin.” Perhaps the cabin and its entangled history stand as a tribute (even though unintended) to the kinds of yarns and tall tales that Abraham Lincoln himself loved to swap, with his booted feet propped near the wood fire’s blaze as he laughed and talked with friends. One can almost hear him say, “Now let me tell you what happened to my old birthplace!”

To give another complex example from the commemoration of Lincoln, recently at Gettysburg National Military Park, in Pennsylvania, a key question that had long concerned park visitors and park staff was re-
searched and finally answered definitively (it is hoped): Where is the genuine, exact spot where Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address? The location turned out to be, however, where many no doubt hoped it would not be. Previously, the best evidence had placed it within the park, and specifically on the grounds of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery. A bust of Lincoln was erected some years ago at this altogether fitting and proper site. But recently, using old photographs that had surfaced in the National Archives, researchers determined that the authentic plot of ground is not even in Gettysburg National Military Park. Rather, it is on the crest of a low hill in the adjacent and private Evergreen Cemetery, a short distance beyond the fence that marks the boundary of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery. The new site is unmarked; although it is accessible to visitors, it is in an area of family burials.

Some historic places and objects undergo physical changes throughout their existence. Efforts at preservation and restoration do not necessarily halt this change; rather, they may be directed toward a special purpose, such as restoring a particular “life stage” of a historic structure. This might be its original appearance or its appearance at a historically significant (or simply well-documented) moment in time. A succeeding generation may well choose to manage a site with a different “historic” appearance in mind, sometimes based solely on whim or personal taste. Modern, not genuinely historic, materials may be used to make a place look “proper.” Sometimes the temptation is to manipulate sites extensively, to the detriment of their historical integrity.

At the extreme, there have been numerous instances in which a full reconstruction became the solution for revisiting the past—sometimes preserving only a few materials actually from the past. For example, at Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site in southeastern Colorado, the foundations were the only original structural remnants from the fort’s heyday (mainly the 1830s–40s). These original traces provided useful information but were covered over to make way for a new “historic” fort, completed in the mid-1970s at a cost of more than $2 million. This modern replica, which had been heavily promoted by influential Coloradans, is furnished with reproductions and period pieces. In addition, costumed interpreters explain to visitors what the original fort was like when it was in use. There were other, less destructive options for treatment of the Bent’s Fort site. The fort’s total reconstruction is a form of historical representation, not preservation. Only whatever undisturbed terrain there is near the make-believe historic structure would still have genuine ties to the historic past. The fort may reflect the past, but it is not of the past.

As a general rule, the greater the intervention at historic places, the greater the manipulation. And the greater the manipulation, the greater the contrivance. As we stray from strict preservation, we come nearer to pure entertainment, and ultimately, to the land of the imaginary: We take the bus not to Bountiful but to Anaheim—the home of Disneyland, with its early-1900s “Main Street, U.S.A.” (In all fairness, though, if you come back a century from now, you may well find that Disneyland has outlived its original purpose, eclipsed by virtual reality experiences. Don’t be surprised then if it has become Disneyland National Historical Park, maintained by the NPS, celebrating its bicentennial.)

Ultimately, preservation is a losing battle, because with time everything decays. A Yosemite biologist once remarked to me that in spite of all we do, historic things do not last forever, so why bother with them? In response, however, it occurred to me that neither will the Yosemite Valley last forever, so it’s all a matter of perspective. (Indeed, the valley has recently experienced substantial rock falls—as if in fulfillment of my prophecy.)

In any event, historic preservation is like the work of morticians: preserving the body for the duration until it no longer matters. But for the time being, it does matter.

Richard West Sellars, a retired National Park Service (NPS) historian who lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the author of Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History (Yale University Press, 1997, 2009). His previous contribution to Natural History was “The Sixth Floor Museum: Commemorating JFK’s Assassination and Other National Traumas” [11/2013]. He is currently completing a memoir, focused mainly on his experiences with and observations of NPS treatment of the parks.