Narrating the Urban Waterfront: The Role of Public History in Community Revitalization

Author(s): ANDREW HURLEY

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Narrating the Urban Waterfront: The Role of Public History in Community Revitalization

ANDREW HURLEY

Abstract: In recent years, urban waterfronts have become effective settings for community-based public history projects. St. Louis, with a long tradition of historical commemoration on its waterfront, provides an opportunity to examine the trend toward grassroots public history in the context of broader urban redevelopment strategies and identify some of the difficulties encountered in constructing more socially inclusive historical narratives. In particular, the case studies reviewed here highlight the challenge of balancing internal community-building goals with the demands of heritage tourism. The case studies also suggest the enormous potential of grassroots public history to connect the residents of diverse metropolitan areas more meaningfully to the urban landscape and to one another.

Keywords: urban revitalization, community revitalization, public history, waterfront, heritage tourism

In recent years, Public History has become a powerful tool for urban revitalization at the grass roots. In cities across the United States, communities have pursued greater social stability and economic vitality by conducting historic house tours, designing history trails, sponsoring oral history
projects, and seeking official historic district status.1 Some of these projects have involved collaboration with professional scholars. Even where they have not, grassroots public history initiatives aimed at community revitalization have drawn upon the insights of social history and cultural landscape studies to revise standard narratives about the urban past. Whereas monuments and historic sites created by civic and economic elites once tended to recount triumphant tales of military heroism and national progress, more recent neighborhood-based initiatives have adopted the analytical categories of class, race, gender, and ethnicity popularized by social historians to expose tales of oppression, injustice, and struggle.2 Similarly, more sophisticated scholarly treatments of place have illuminated the social processes behind the production of ordinary landscapes, thereby enabling neighborhoods to nurture collective memory in a wide variety of sites including tenements, markets, factories, meeting halls, and parks.3

The construction of alternative narratives and the migration of historical interpretation to previously marginalized terrain, however, have not immunized community-based projects from the pitfalls and criticisms associated with their elite-driven counterparts. For example, the danger of reducing history to uncritical celebration lurks wherever manufacturing local pride constitutes a project goal. Moreover, the pragmatics of executing neighborhood public history projects often require collaboration with elite political and eco-


onomic actors who have different ideas about what types of interpretation are suitable for public consumption. Finally, to the extent that neighborhood revitalization strategies emphasize heritage tourism, projects may compromise aspects of interpretation that bear directly on the needs and concerns of local populations. Balancing the goals of community building from within and capturing attention and investment from without remain precarious tasks. These challenges notwithstanding, the potential payoff from engaging struggling communities in the reconstruction of their history is enormous. Even when executed imperfectly, aligning narratives with the experiences of ordinary urban inhabitants and their specific community agendas holds tremendous promise for succeeding where earlier variants of public historical presentation fell short, that is, in connecting people of diverse backgrounds more firmly to the urban landscape, bringing a greater sense of social unity to a fragmented metropolis, and restoring the vitality of America’s metropolitan cores.

In recent years, urban waterfronts have become attractive sites for alternative community-based approaches to public history. As such, they present an opportunity to chart the evolution of public history in the context of broader redevelopment strategies and assess their potential for a more meaningful social attachment to landscape and place. Arguably, no component of the urban landscape has been subject to more explicit historical interpretation in the service of redevelopment goals over the past fifty years. As many older port facilities, warehouses, and factories became obsolete after World War II, cities pursued renewal strategies that transformed their decaying waterfronts into vibrant economic and social spaces. In one city after another in the United States, as well as in other parts of the industrialized world, these areas were recast as historic districts, places imbued with perceivable references to the past. Rhetoric surrounding heritage-based redevelopment projects promised to recover the close relationship between city and waterfront that had lapsed with the decline of waterborne commerce and the dereliction of the waterfront landscape. Striving to recreate a lively and crowded social environment that would contribute to a more exciting and livable city, planners, policymakers, and developers looked to the past for inspiration. By the 1970s, they had gone a step further, actively promoting the preservation and reuse of historic structures. Refurbished warehouses, old sailing ships, and heritage museums served to lure sightseers and shoppers to the waterfront and remind them that something important once happened there.


rehabilitated in this fashion, including New York City’s South Street Seaport, Boston’s Faneuil Hall Marketplace, and Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, cultivated a celebratory version of the past that was consistent with their emphasis on tourism and consumption. Typically, references to social conflict were muted, and the industrial era was ignored in favor of attention to a more remote preindustrial past. Although many of the mass consumer-oriented waterfront revitalization projects have proven themselves successful from a financial standpoint, they have often compromised the goal of reintegrating the waterfront into the fabric of civic life.

Very recently, however, alternative waterfront development strategies have arisen to accommodate a very different use of history, one oriented less toward tourism and consumption and more toward the needs and agendas of local communities. Continuing population flight to the suburbs and the dissipation of civic identity due to suburban fragmentation and sprawl have legitimized waterfront revitalization strategies that seek to create a sense of place and sites of social engagement for people who live and work in the city. Where history has been incorporated into these strategies, it has, to a greater extent than ever before, addressed social conflict and brought people of color and members of the working classes to the front and center of narratives.

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typifies this transition, and the following review of waterfront commemoration projects there will highlight the promise of alternative public history approaches along with some of the dilemmas associated with their implementation. The contemporary initiatives covered in this article will be discussed from the perspective of a participant observer.9

The St. Louis Levee: From Commercial Hub to Historic District

St. Louis has long been defined by its relationship to water, particular its rivers. French fur traders founded the city just below the confluence of three great rivers, the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Illinois. The city’s rapid growth in the first half of the nineteenth century corresponded with the expansion of trade on the Mississippi and the growing number of western migrants who passed through the Gateway to the West along the Missouri River route charted by Lewis and Clark. For nearly a century after its founding in 1764, the interior river system was St. Louis’s lifeline to the rest of the world, and by 1850, St. Louis had become the second largest port in the country, measured by tonnage.

As a result of this extensive commerce, the levee district on the bank of the Mississippi River bustled with activity. During peak season, over one hundred steamboats stood cheek to jowl along a one-mile stretch of the downtown waterfront, and thousands of workers were kept busy loading and unloading cargo. It was a place where people from all walks of life encountered one another, where news from afar arrived first, where laborers were hired, and where deals were made. Not merely a colorful adjunct to the city, the waterfront was its most vivid articulation.10

With the demise of the steamboat after the Civil War, however, the central harbor lost much of its vitality. Inactivity bred physical decay, and by the turn of the twentieth century, the levee district had become an embarrassment. Dilapidated buildings gave the area a bedraggled appearance that, in the opinion of the city leaders, both tarnished the city’s image and depressed property values in the adjacent downtown business district. Equally pernicious were the vestiges of the rough-and-tumble social environment of the steamboat era. The narrow streets leading up the steep hill behind the levee were

9. My involvement with waterfront revitalization initiatives dates to the early 1990s, when I began conducting historical research in the St. Louis riverfront. In addition to serving as a consultant for a central waterfront revitalization planning process, I have been actively involved in the Old North St. Louis and Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing projects described in this article.

still lined with cheap lodging houses, brothels, gambling dens, and saloons. According to a 1907 report authored by a prominent reform organization, “some parts of . . . [the waterfront] have become to such an extent the rendezvous of the vicious and depraved that respectable citizens hesitate to pass through these quarters on their way to the boats on the river.”

Civic pride and the fear of downtown property value depreciation thus provided the impetus for a sustained campaign to rehabilitate the central waterfront. A powerful coalition of business, political, and civic leaders kept the issue in the forefront of public attention for nearly three decades, until a commitment of support from the federal government ensured the necessary funds in 1935. Debate raged for another thirteen years over the precise design of the rehabilitated waterfront, but on one point there was near unanimity: all the dilapidated buildings within a thirty-seven-block area adjacent to the river would be razed, save for perhaps one or two of unusual historic value. Only through comprehensive demolition and reconstruction could the city ensure that the waterfront would no longer exert a blighting social and economic influence on the central business district. With the establishment of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and the completion of the Gateway Arch astride the Mississippi in 1965, this objective was realized and the city became reoriented to the river, at least symbolically.

If historical commemoration was not the driving force behind waterfront renewal, neither was it a mere afterthought. The historic importance of the central levee was widely acknowledged among St. Louisans, and it received attention in every plan for its regeneration. Although in hindsight it seems ironic that the city would commemorate its heritage by demolishing its oldest standing landscape, this approach was entirely consistent with the way in which city leaders and planners understood the area’s historic significance. The central levee was the site of the city’s founding, the place where Pierre Laclede established the original settlement of fur traders in 1764. Yet all of the colonial-era structures had long since disappeared, casualties of the Great Fire of 1849; there was nothing left to preserve for the purpose of memorializing the city’s founders. The oldest remaining buildings, the stone warehouse built by fur trader Manuel Lisa in 1818 and the Old Cathedral on Walnut Street which dated to 1834, became the object of a preservationist campaign, but their historic value never translated into a justification for saving the entire waterfront district. In most proposals, paying homage to the city’s founding fathers required only a prominently placed monument at the water’s edge. In the end, Lisa’s warehouse was demolished while the cathedral was preserved.

11. Civic Improvement League of St. Louis, A City Plan for St. Louis (St. Louis, 1907), 59–61.
13. Within St. Louis there were few calls for preservation of the late-nineteenth-century commercial landscape, although the district did have architectural significance on account of the pioneering use of cast-iron building facades. See Sigfried Giedion, Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 134–38.
dral was spared, leaving it as the only relic on the grounds of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial.\textsuperscript{14}

An even more compelling reason to highlight the waterfront’s historic significance derived from its central role in the majestic saga of westward expansion. In this context, the site assumed national importance as the staging ground for westward pioneers who, at least according to Frederick Jackson’s subsequent frontier thesis, brought civilization to the continent. Early on, civic leaders saw an opportunity to use the renewal process to commemorate Thomas Jefferson, the Louisiana Purchase, and the thousands of hardy pioneers who passed through the district to embark on the long journey westward. Framing the story in national terms proved instrumental in obtaining federal funds and securing its status as a national park. Again, the dilapidated warehouses, taverns, and lodging houses were deemed inappropriate for the purposes of commemoration. The social element they harbored clashed with the theme of civilizing a continent, and the extant buildings drew more attention to the permanent class of laborers who once worked in them than the enterprising folk who passed through. Again, a modernistic monument was deemed the most effective way to convey the site’s significance, and the Gateway Arch served this purpose admirably.\textsuperscript{15}

The success of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial inspired further efforts to highlight the historic significance of the St. Louis waterfront. An engineering marvel offering a spectacular view from its observation deck at 630 feet, the Gateway Arch was a tourist bonanza. In its first ten years of operation, it attracted over sixteen million visitors. According to one estimate, only Lenin’s Tomb, Disneyland, and Disneyworld attracted greater crowds.\textsuperscript{16} Still, city leaders grumbled that the tourist potential of the waterfront was not fully realized by the completion of the arch. An economic analysis of the local tourist trade found that the average visit to the arch was no longer than one hour, after which tourists abandoned the area. Alphonso Cervantes, the city’s mayor at the time, was particularly eager to promote tourism to compensate for the erosion of the city’s industrial base. To this end, he established a special fund to market the city to out-of-towners and campaigned vigorously for a downtown convention center. Still needed, however, were additional cul-

\textsuperscript{14} See, for instance, St. Louis City Plan Commission, \textit{A Plan for the Central River Front, Saint Louis, Missouri} (St. Louis, City Plan Commission, 1928). The Old Courthouse, situated just west of the thirty-seven-block tract, was also incorporated into the Expansion Memorial.


\textsuperscript{16} Primm, \textit{Lion of the Valley}, 484.
tural attractions that would make St. Louis a more popular tourist destination and extend the stay of visitors once they arrived.\(^{17}\)

The decaying factory and warehouse district located just north of the Gateway Arch grounds was viewed as a perfect complement to the Expansion Memorial in terms of its ability to produce a full-fledged downtown tourist district. Known as Laclede’s Landing, it was the only part of the city where one could still find remnants of the town’s original street plan laid out by French fur traders in the eighteenth century. It also contained some of the oldest buildings in the city, including some that predated the Great Fire of 1849. Of particular architectural significance, however, were those built shortly after the conflagration. Draped around cast iron skeletons and adorned with cast iron facades for the purposes of fire prevention, they were forerunners of the modern skyscraper. Because most of the nineteenth-century structures were obsolete by mid-twentieth-century standards, the conversion of the area into a tourist and entertainment district posed little threat to existing economic activities.\(^{18}\)

Although the idea of demolishing all the obsolete buildings and rebuilding anew still had its advocates in the late 1960s, the prevailing wisdom in St. Louis now favored preservation and rehabilitation. The buildings that were condemned as pernicious eyesores decades earlier suddenly assumed great historic significance and thus warranted a new lease on life. This turnabout in philosophy certainly corresponded with the growing strength of the historic preservation movement nationally, but it was also rooted in changed circumstances within the downtown area, not the least of which was the purging of nefarious social elements from the levee district several decades earlier. Although the rise of the historic preservation movement in the 1960s and 1970s has often been viewed as a response to the sort of wholesale destruction of historic landscapes represented by the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, what has not been appreciated is the extent to which the demolition of blighted landscapes and the removal of undesirable populations from the fringes of downtown made saving the few remaining old buildings more palatable.\(^{19}\) With skid row now at a safe distance from the waterfront, planners and developers in St. Louis could conceive of rehabilitating some of the city’s older

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structures along the river and extending the orbit of tourism beyond the Memorial Arch grounds.

Moreover, the experience of several other cities, most notably San Francisco and New Orleans, showed the direct economic benefits of saving historic structures along the waterfront. An old chocolate factory on San Francisco Bay and a cluster of distinctive buildings in the French Quarter of New Orleans provided the basis for turning two bedraggled waterfront districts into major tourist attractions. Ghirardelli Square and the French Quarter served as explicit models to be emulated in the revitalization of Laclede’s Landing with century-old foundries, hide houses, candy factories, and tobacco plants as the primary draw.20

The history contained within these old buildings, however, received only superficial and selective scrutiny. Unlike the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, which was created as a public entity and administered by the National Park Service, Laclede’s Landing was developed by private investors. In 1975, the city, acting under the auspices of Missouri state law, designated the Laclede’s Landing Redevelopment Corporation as the sole organization responsible for undertaking the district’s restoration. A private company with shares of stock owned and traded primarily among bankers and local landowners, the Redevelopment Corporation supervised all planning and design within the officially blighted district, although individual property holders were responsible for financing the rehabilitation of buildings and finding tenants. Despite the corporation’s vow to “bring back the heritage of St. Louis,” Laclede’s Landing was first and foremost a money-making venture. In the absence of a strong educational or public mission, history was invoked sparingly, and primarily as a complement to consumer and tourist activities. Visitors encountered little in the way of explicit interpretation in the form of markers or museums, and when redevelopers extolled the virtues of the restored landscape, they invariably cited its role in crafting a unique and visually compelling setting for shopping boutiques, nightclubs, and restaurants. Cobblestone streets, antique street lamps, rehabilitated nineteenth-century buildings, and a Mississippi River backdrop formed a stage set that recalled a bygone era. History would keep businesses thriving by making the landing an exciting destination, a place that would generate a buzz around the country and a place to which visitors would want to return.21 Much like the festival marketplace schemes implemented in other cities around this time, Laclede’s Landing


aimed to naturalize consumer spending as part of a mythic urban experience, where strangers interact spontaneously and democratically in a lively public space, by embedding modern shopping functions in a reconstructed historic fabric.22

To the extent that Laclede’s Landing projected an implicit historical message, it mirrored the narrative employed at the Expansion Memorial. Although the preserved warehouses and factories possessed over a century’s worth of drama, only the very earliest years of the district’s history were deemed worthy of attention. From the project’s inception in the 1960s, developers sought an atmosphere that would capture the “authentic” character of St. Louis as it was perceived both locally and in the minds of out-of-towners steeped in the lore of steamboats and rugged pioneers. Thus, despite the fact that many of the buildings in the district were of post–Civil War vintage, proposals for redeveloping the Landing preferred to emphasize the “Golden Era of the 1850s,” a time when the city was “the nation’s river metropolis and the take-off place for explorers, trappers, traders and settlers in the West.”23

Connected to the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial geographically and thematically, Laclede’s Landing delivered a version of history that was ro-

mantic, celebratory, and discrete, in the sense of its detachment from preceding and subsequent eras.

The revamped St. Louis waterfront comprising the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and Laclede’s Landing was heralded as an economic triumph. Through the 1980s and 1990s, these two attractions continued to draw throngs of visitors and helped the city make the transition from an industrial-based economy to one oriented toward services and consumption. In terms of their ability to leverage the past to rouse civic pride and re-appropriate the waterfront as a community asset, the results were more ambiguous. Commemoration and preservation certainly contributed to the production of distinctive places that elicited considerable local admiration. The Gateway Arch lifted a flagging civic spirit not only by adding a distinctive landmark to an otherwise drab skyline but by reminding St. Louisans that their city was once at the heart of a grand, national enterprise. Very quickly it became a beloved civic icon; its likeness appeared on dozens of logos, and more than one hundred companies adopted either “Gateway” or “Arch” as part of their official name. Laclede’s Landing offered local residents as well as tourists a theatrical experience that fulfilled nostalgic fantasies of a lively yet safe brand of urbanity. Surveys conducted during the early 1980s showed local patronage varying between 43 and 58 percent of the total.

Even if many local residents admired and visited the revamped waterfront, it remained weakly integrated into the city’s fabric, and few saw it as a place that was really theirs. Physical barriers impeding access from downtown, most notably an interstate highway, were partly to blame, but so were matters of interpretation, operation, and design. Bemoaning the memorial’s failure to foster a collective identity, Robert Archibald, director of the Missouri Historical Society, asked rhetorically: “The arch itself is monument to those thousands of people who migrated through St. Louis for parts west. What of those who stayed?” Speaking for St. Louisans at large, a local journalist complained: “We don’t take friends to the Landing when they visit. We don’t dine on the Landing when we want to go someplace special. And we don’t think of the Landing when we talk about those places that make St. Louis truly unique.”

Another newspaper reporter dubbed it a “tourist trap without the trappings.”

For many African Americans, the memories conjured by the refurbished waterfront remained painful ones that stemmed directly from the act of com-


26. Team Four Research, Retail and Restaurant Market Potential, Laclede’s Landing, St. Louis, Missouri (St. Louis: Team Four Research, 1985), 7.

27. Robert Archibald, A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 42.


memoration. In the late 1940s and then again in the 1960s, prominent African-American leaders pressed unsuccessfully for a riverfront memorial to the dark-skinned composer of the *St. Louis Blues*, W. C. Handy. On Laclede’s Landing, a building marker informed visitors that the first governor of Missouri was inaugurated at the site, yet neglected to mention that it was also once the home of Jacques Clamorgan, a fur trader of partial African extraction who owned several parcels of land in the district and became the patriarch of one of the city’s prominent African American families. As for the Arch itself, it resonated less as an adored icon than as a symbol of injustice. During its construction, the Arch grounds became the site of repeated demonstrations protesting discriminatory hiring practices on the project. Since its completion, the event most closely associated with the monument among many St. Louisans was the dramatic 1964 protest that inspired two activists to chain themselves to an unfinished leg of the structure.

*Re-Imagining Urban Rivers and their Historic Value*

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the challenges associated with metropolitan sprawl and fragmentation leapt to the forefront of the urban agenda and placed the shortcomings of big downtown waterfront commemoration projects in sharper relief. Multicultural tensions, enclave mentalities, and the proliferation of governmental units were increasingly cited as impediments to metropolitan progress on a number of fronts, including education, natural resource management, transportation, and balanced regional growth. To some observers in St. Louis and beyond, the absence of any collective attachment to place cut to the core of the problem. Although metropolitan St. Louis did not experience the wave of foreign immigration that sparked civil disorders in Miami and Los Angeles, it nonetheless retained its reputation as one of the most racially polarized places in the country. Racial disparities in just about every index of urban life showed little sign of dissipating into the twenty-first century, and racial mistrust and antagonism con-


continued to suffuse local politics.34 With regard to sprawl, St. Louis was arguably the nation’s poster child. By the end of the twentieth century the city had been bleeding population to the outlying suburbs at an alarming rate for decades. From a peak of 850,000 residents in 1950, the city’s population had dwindled to below 350,000 by 2000. Meanwhile, the resettlement of this population across more than 700 political jurisdictions eroded any sense of allegiance to or identification with a central geographic entity. In the eyes of many local critics, sprawl thinned the quality of both urban and suburban life while it sapped metropolitan areas of their capacity to generate a sense of community and belonging. Part of the problem, according to this view, was the standard-ized and monotonous character of the expansive metropolitan landscape, which left St. Louis with few distinctive places around which people might gravitate, develop a common identity, and cultivate social bonds. Although historic waterfront districts did indeed strive to create a distinct sense of place, their emphasis on out-of-town audiences along with their selective use of the past severely compromised their capacity for generating unity within their metropolitan communities.35

Out of these emergent set of concerns, urban rivers have become the fo-cus of community-building initiatives in a number of major cities, including St. Paul, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Omaha, Los Angeles, and St. Louis. Less pre-occupied with central harbor areas close to downtown business districts, these recent efforts have concentrated on neighborhoods and portions of those rivers running through them. Along with the shift in geographical emphasis has come a new rhetoric promising to pull water fronts “into the mainstream of public activity,” and claiming that riverfronts are “for everyone.” In experimenting with formulas to develop waterfronts as vital community spaces, advocates of the new approach have combined varying mixes of environmental preservation, public history, and economic development. Undoubtedly the most common feature of this new vision is the promotion of active recreation through bike and hiking trails. In many cases, these trails have been enhanced through a nontraditional form of historic preservation, the restoration of original natural landscapes, including the re-introduction of native flora and fauna, the regeneration of wetlands, and even the removal of floodwalls and embank-ments to restore rivers to their original meandering channels. The com-memoration of historic events has been a less ubiquitous component of re-


cent waterfront revitalization plans, although it has been integral to projects in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. At least in the latter case, a community-oriented approach has encouraged the public to re-imagine its historical relationship to the waterfronts.

St. Louis’s attempt to re-link disparate neighborhoods and foster a community of interest around a shared landscape got underway with the establishment of Confluence Greenway, a forty-mile bi-state riverside heritage, recreation, and conservation corridor. Confluence Greenway currently features a nine-mile paved bike trail that begins in downtown St. Louis and follows the Mississippi River north to the city limits. Future plans include a major interpretive center, expansion of a community native plant nursery, habitat restoration, and nature observation stations. According to promotional literature, “rediscovering heritage” constitutes a major thrust of its “plan to re-unite people with our rivers” and to “restore the Mississippi River as the focal point of the St. Louis region’s ecological, economic, and social vitality.”

To draw attention to the rich history of the waterfront and garner some national support, the project’s organizers, a coalition of local social service, conservation, and civic groups, are exploring the possibility of securing a “National Heritage Corridor” designation from the National Park Service. More impressively, they have encouraged and supported grassroots initiatives that incorporate the Riverfront Trail into neighborhood revitalization schemes. The historical stories and themes that have proven constructive for the purposes of rebuilding inner-city neighborhoods have turned out to be quite different than those deemed most useful for generating downtown tourism and consumption. Not only have these historical narratives encompassed a larger geographical area, extending far beyond the central harbor area, but they have also included a wider range of historical actors. Rather than shy away from controversial and disturbing aspects of history, community-based historical narratives have embraced them as vehicles for local empowerment. Finally, the goal of knitting these stories together in a “heritage corridor” facilitates a truly regional approach to place-making, one that integrates varied dimen-


The Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing

In twenty-first-century St. Louis, more than ever before, reconnecting urban residents to the Mississippi River requires a direct appeal to and the active engagement of the city’s African-American community. African Americans constitute roughly fifty percent of the city’s population, and in the wards through which the Riverfront Trail passes, the percentage is even higher. Yet the orbit of neighborhood life rarely extends to the waterfront on the north side of St. Louis, largely due to a series of physical obstructions that include a highway, an industrial corridor, and a floodwall. The goal of the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing is to transform the northern waterfront into both a community asset for nearby residents and a major tourist destination by highlighting the special historical relationship between African Americans and the Mississippi River. Still under development, the project has pursued this goal by bringing previously unknown stories from the city’s past to public light and locating them in a compelling counter-narrative.

The Meachum Crossing inverts the cliché, communicated at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and to lesser extent at Laclede’s Landing, that the path to opportunity and social advancement led from the St. Louis waterfront west. For slaves seeking liberty in the years leading up to the Civil
War, social mobility entailed a journey eastward across the river to the free state of Illinois. That is precisely what nine slaves sought in their attempt to cross the river on the night of May 21, 1855. They were assisted by Mary Meachum, a prominent free woman of color and the widow of John Berry Meachum, a nationally renowned clergyman and abolitionist. From Meachum’s house downtown, the entourage made its way to a remote location on the river just north of the city limits. There, they boarded a skiff and set off across the rushing water to Illinois. Whereas most underground railroad episodes are lost to the historical record due to their clandestine nature, this one left a trail of newspaper accounts and court documents because it went awry. Unbeknownst to the fugitives, a posse awaited them on the Illinois shore. Upon landing, the runaways and their conductors encountered a barrage of gunfire. One abolitionist escort was shot, five slaves were apprehended, and Meachum was arrested for operating an “underground railroad depot.” At least one of the captured slaves, a woman named Esther, was separated from her children and “sold downriver” as punishment by her owner.

The Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing commemorates this event with a small sign at the spot where the skiff was launched, a nearby display board with images and text, a mural painted by high school students depicting the event, and an annual re-enactment of the tragedy on the banks of the Mississippi River. Although the nine-acre site sits astride Confluence Greenway’s riverfront bicycle trail, its proximity to an odorous sewage treatment plant and its quarter-mile distance from the nearest flood-wall opening make its conversion into a cultural destination a risky proposition. Nonetheless, during the fall of 2003 and the spring of 2004, north St. Louis residents collaborated with professional designers to plan a much more elaborate memorial, one that would magnify the gravity of the tragedy for both local and national audiences and establish this parcel of riverfront property as a sacred landscape, a kind of holy ground that stood front and center of the national struggle for freedom and racial justice.

The campaign to establish and enhance the Freedom Crossing was spearheaded by the Grace Hill Settlement House, a local social service agency. Founded in 1903, Grace Hill Settlement House has dedicated itself to the mission of assisting needy families on the north side of St. Louis through a variety of programs for youth, the unemployed, the homeless, and the infirm. Beginning with Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, Grace Hill took on the re-


sponsibility for administering a wide range of social programs funded by the federal government, including Head Start, VISTA, and more recently AmeriCorps. Today it operates several inner-city health clinics and offers transitional housing for homeless women, adult literacy courses, job training programs, and a resource exchange service.\textsuperscript{40}

Grace Hill’s interest in historic preservation flowed from its commitment to create resilient and healthy inner-city communities. With the creation of Confluence Greenway’s bicycle trail, Grace Hill recognized an opportunity to draw interest, investment, and resources not just to the waterfront but to the adjacent neighborhoods where it maintained an active presence. Public history emerged as an ideal mechanism for leveraging the appeal of the riverfront trail into a broader strategy for neighborhood revitalization. Heritage tourism became a central part of that strategy because it promised to enhance the riverfront as community asset by providing jobs, recreational opportunities, and a sense of inclusion in broader civic initiatives among the low-income, largely African-American population served by the agency. In this respect, historical commemoration on the riverfront dovetailed with Grace Hill’s efforts to hire local youth as trail rangers and to replant native flowers along the trail under the federally funded AmeriCorps program.

To ensure that development of the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing coincided with local needs, Grace Hill engaged surrounding communities in the planning process. During the summer of 2003, Grace Hill convened a community advisory board consisting of representatives from neighborhood associations, churches, schools, and the mayor’s office, along with local scholars and preservationists. Over the course of nine months, the advisory board endorsed the selection of a professional design team for further development of the Freedom Crossing site and then consulted directly with the chosen team. Its most important duty, however, was to solicit the participation of the wider public in a series of community workshops at which the site design was developed and refined. Well over a hundred residents, children as well as adults, attended each of these workshops, which were held at north-side schools on three separate weekends in early 2004. Through breakout sessions and small group presentations, the local community relayed to the designers its views on such matters as the physical configuration of the site, historic interpretation, neighborhood access to the waterfront, and how the site might incorporate amenities for north-side residents such as fishing piers, food concessions, and swimming facilities.\textsuperscript{41} The final plan, unveiled at a Juneteenth celebration on the waterfront, was very much a product of the conversations and feedback generated at the community and advisory board meetings.

While the goal of making the site a national tourist destination demanded a compelling national framework for the story, the community called for elab-


\textsuperscript{41} Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing Design Team “Community Design Workshop,” March 2004, in author’s possession.
oration of the local context as well. By the 1850s, the nation’s destiny hinged on events occurring in places like St. Louis. Missouri was a border state, evenly divided over the issue of slavery that was threatening to split the nation. St. Louis thus became an intense battleground between proponents and opponents of the “peculiar institution” and the outcome of local events reverberated far and wide. It was in St. Louis that lawyers first argued the Dred Scott case, which ultimately made its way to the United States Supreme Court and became a major catalyst for the Civil War. The Mississippi River at St. Louis was also a major junction on the underground railroad as slaves sought to make the passage from bondage in the Deep South to freedom in Canada. Mary Meachum’s crossing was thus part of a dramatic story that unfolded on a national canvas; to ignore its national scope would not only diminish its tourist appeal but would minimize its true significance.

Yet for the people living in the vicinity of the historic site, commemoration also offered the possibility of publicizing local history, not just the tension between slavery and abolition as it developed in antebellum St. Louis, but a thorough account of neighborhood development over two centuries. At the first community workshop, participants expressed a keen desire to showcase the rich heritage of the north side of St. Louis, including the Native American mound builders who flourished prior to the arrival of European settlers, the teeming immigrant quarters of the late nineteenth century, and the struggle of African Americans to break the barriers to integrated housing in the twentieth century. Although most of those in attendance already knew something about these subjects, they wanted to know more and saw the Mary Meachum
initiative as an opportunity to conduct further research on a part of the city that has received scant attention from historians.42

Weaving the local and national stories required the design team to ask why an event of national proportions occurred where it did, a question that could only be answered by investigating local history. In 1855, when Mary Meachum set out on her perilous journey, the crossing site was just across the northern boundary of the City of St. Louis in a kind of no-man’s land, wedged between the working-class neighborhood of Bremen on the south and the fledgling municipality of Lowell on the north. It was part of a much larger estate once owned by Captain Lewis Bissell, who had served his country during the War of 1812 and eventually returned to the St. Louis area to build a country estate on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. Although Bissell gradually sold off a substantial portion of his property to other speculative investors and subdividers, the parcel along the riverfront remained unsuitable for development because it was subject to periodic flooding. Isolated from nearby municipal jurisdictions, it was an ideal place to evade the law. It was also a place where crossing the river, always a treacherous endeavor, was made slightly less so by the Mississippi’s narrow width at that point. Indeed, the relatively short crossing inspired Lewis Bissell to establish a ferry service to Illinois in 1850 just south of the location where Meachum launched her skiff. Several decades later, in 1889, railroad companies built a bridge across the river, connecting the same points as the ferry.43 The natural characteristics of the Mississippi River and the spatial relationship to downtown St. Louis were factors that influenced Mary Meachum’s decision just as they influenced the development of north-side neighborhoods. Thus, the geography of the Meachum tragedy opens a window onto a very different story, one with the potential to satisfy the yearning among residents to have their local history acknowledged and told.

Elaborating the local context also necessitated revising the history that has generally been delivered to the St. Louis public. In particular, it meant denigrating a much beloved local hero, Henry Shaw. It was Shaw who established the city’s first major park, Tower Grove Park, and it was he who laid the groundwork for the world-renowned Missouri Botanical Garden. Shaw was also the slave owner who punished the captured runaway, Esther, who was “sold down river” to Vicksburg, thereby separating her from her children. Not surprisingly, Shaw’s slave-owning activities had not previously been publicized in St. Louis. At the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, visitors will encounter Shaw as a perpetrator of one of slavery’s ugliest practices. Among the suggestions that sprang from the community was the idea of planting a slave garden at the

42. Ibid.
43. Colleen M. Hamilton, Cheryl A. Markham, and Joseph M. Nixon, Report of Phase I Level Cultural Resource Survey of Proposed Bissell Point Treatment Plant Expansion Area, City of St. Louis, St. Louis County, Missouri (St. Louis: Havens & Emerson, Inc./Sverdrup Parcel, Inc. and Metropolitan Sewer District of St. Louis, 1985).
site—a place of repose and reflection—to serve as a counterpart to Shaw’s Missouri Botanical Garden.44

Although current plans do not call for a slave botanical garden, the proposed site design creates meaning directly from the existing natural landscape, thus further contributing to the expansion of historic preservation beyond the saving of old buildings. Public historians committed to a more inclusive approach to the past, in particular, have struggled with the challenge of telling the story of marginalized populations in the absence of abundant material relics. In some instances they have turned to public art as an interpretive vehicle where no elements of the built environment remain extant. A mural at the Meachum site is representative of this approach. Although public historians have also acknowledged the potential of the natural environment to serve as an object of explicit analysis in urban settings, the Meachum site employs the natural landscape in an unusually imaginative way to reconstruct a story.45 To this day, the land on the river side of the massive concrete floodwall remains undeveloped and appears much as it did in Meachum’s day.46

46. Ironically, continuity in the contours of the landscape over time is in part due to the success of human engineering in securing a permanent channel for navigation purposes. The most
ing at the spot where Meachum launched the skiff, visitors can gaze eastward upon a relatively unaltered landscape and appreciate the river’s role as a boundary and the land beyond it as a horizon of hope. Because there are no structures on the site that pertain to the event, the natural landscape has emerged as the major object of preservation. To communicate the story to visitors, some new construction is planned; a “Wall of Remembrance” arcing around the site will constitute a canvas for text and images while a barge located in the river will be used for further interpretation and a visitor center. Nine light towers rising behind the curving steel wall will symbolize each of the runaway slaves. A beacon on the opposite shore will symbolize the goal of freedom by allusion to the North Star, which fugitive slaves used as a navigation aid. Rather than intruding on the landscape, however, the site design is intended to draw attention to it. In particular, the steep slope down to the river will be utilized to convey both literally and metaphorically the precarious and dangerous nature of the escape endeavor. Under the nine U-shaped towers, visitors will read about and stand in the shoes of the fugitives. Steep grooves will be cut in the embankment to lead visitors to the river where they can visualize and re-experience the tension between the dangerous and unruly Mississippi at their feet and beacon of freedom beckoning on the opposite shore. Although this design is currently undergoing further refinement

likely change in the appearance of the landscape is the abundance of trees on the contemporary riverbank as the practice of wooding contributed to deforestation along the shoreline during much of the steamboat era. F. Terry Norris, “Where Did the Villages Go? Steamboats, Deforestation, and Archaeological Loss in the Mississippi Valley,” Common Fields: An Environmental History of St. Louis (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1997), 73–89.
to ensure its compliance with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regulations, the power of interpretation will reside in the natural landscape, and its preservation on both sides of the river remains critical to the fulfillment of the community’s vision.47

The inclusion of property in Illinois as part of the site design is critical for two reasons. Not only does it convey the bi-state nature of the event, but it fulfills a goal of binding disparate segments of the metropolitan regions. Due in part to the predominance of a low-income minority population in East St. Louis and other riverfront towns along the Illinois shore, St. Louisans have tended to disavow any relationship to the “east side.” Project leaders hope that cultivating a sense of a shared heritage is a step toward creating a more unified metropolis.

The Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing site design received strong community endorsement despite some internal friction over interpretive standards and priorities. Disagreement swirled, for example, around the use of a story about Mary Meachum’s husband, John Berry Meachum, who purportedly evaded state laws forbidding the provision of education to free blacks by converting a steamboat into a schoolhouse and mooring it in the Mississippi River. This act of courage and resistance lent direct support to the project’s goal of portraying the Meachums as inspirational figures and role models for the present generation. The choice of a floating barge to house the site’s educational center commemorated this episode explicitly. Unfortunately, historians working on the project found no documentary evidence to verify the story. Tracing back the tale in published accounts hit a dead end in 1964.48 Some members of the advisory committee counseled against any reference to the steamboat schoolhouse on the grounds that it would undermine the project’s credibility. Alternative solutions might involve open acknowledgment of the internal debate or commemoration of the lore as opposed to the episode itself. However the matter is ultimately handled, the debate demonstrates that grassroots initiatives are no less likely than elite-driven ones to perpetuate myths rather than examine them critically when celebration and manufacturing pride are underlying project objectives.

Another example of how interpretive strategies foster myth-making lies in the claim that the memorial marks the precise spot where Meachum and her party launched the skiff. The sign posted alongside the river betrays no ambiguity on the matter. Yet, newspaper accounts locate the event only generally. The chosen site is certainly in the vicinity of the actual place, but its selection was due primarily to its landscape characteristics; without any urban or industrial intrusions, it most closely approximated the likely appearance of

47. At the time of this writing, a potential threat to this vision is the plan for a new container port on the Illinois side of the river directly across from the Meachum site.
the original crossing site. Because in the proposed design enlightenment derives from the experience of standing in the shoes of the slaves and following their footsteps to the point of disembarkation at the river, the desired emotional response requires the suspension of disbelief regarding the authenticity of the location. On this particular issue, there was little discussion and no debate. Presumably, the awkwardness of qualification and the fear of undermining efforts to cultivate a sense of holy ground overrode concerns about authenticity and credibility.

Reconciling the dual objectives of producing a “must-see” tourist site, on the one hand, and articulating local identity, on the other, also confronted project designers with hard choices. Although interpretive panels are reserved for elaborating the local dimensions of the Meachum story, it remains unclear how information about the adjacent neighborhoods will be woven into the broader humanities themes of freedom and justice. As the project prepares for a multi-million-dollar capital campaign, the task of demonstrating a national appeal has assumed precedence over developing the local story. Thus far, the interpretation set forth in the mural, the re-enactment, and the display board attaches the particulars of the 1855 event to the brutality of a Southern slave regime and a universalistic quest for freedom, without reference, for instance, to how the legacy of that quest might be manifested in the very neighborhoods that currently surround the site. Indeed, the trajectory of action in the site design, from the Missouri riverbank across the water to Illinois, and from specific event to abstract objective, heightens the difficulty of grounding visitors’ reflections in the particularities of place in a metropolitan context. Its emphasis on passage through space and its subordination of local history render the Meachum memorial vulnerable to the same trap of alienating local audiences as the downtown tourist venues.

There are compelling reasons to believe that even with the current approach, history will strengthen the local population’s emotional and psychological attachment to the northern waterfront. In this particular story, some of the protagonists remained in the area and the Meachums in particular boasted long careers of local social activism that influenced subsequent strategies for racial advancement in the area as well as beyond. Indeed, one of the project’s current activities involves linking the Meachum site programmatically, through tours and potentially joint management, to other important African-American commemorative sites in the region. Extending the Meachum narrative through a network of slavery and civil rights sites and thus inscribing the metropolitan terrain with acknowledgements of its African-American heritage promises to advance a more inclusive sense of belonging. Finally, and perhaps most important, the tension between local and national audience is mitigated by the particular way in which African Americans construct historical memory. According to survey research conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, African Americans more readily find personal res-
onance in national collective narratives than their white counterparts. In other words, it requires no stretch of imagination for most African Americans to grasp how national or even global patterns of racial oppression and struggle explain the situations they find themselves in today. The local response to the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing thus far—not only the impressive turnout at the community workshops but the consistently heavy attendance at the annual anniversary celebration and persistent demand from schools, senior citizen centers, and other community organizations to schedule performances of the re-enactment—would seem to confirm this finding. So too would some of the comments voiced by residents attending Meachum programs. Impressing them with the importance of seeking freedom in a contemporary context through education and providing inspiration for youth to “put some value on their lives” and to steer clear of criminal activity, history has readily translated into a vision of community improvement. At this point, the experience of the Meachum project suggests that a heritage tourism strategy can function effectively to build community, especially when targeted toward specialized audiences.

If the Meachum Crossing’s fate as a national tourist destination remains uncertain, the 2005 anniversary celebration of the Meachum crossing affirmed public history’s power to transform a desolate waterfront space into a regional cultural resource. Whereas previous anniversary celebrations at the crossing site drew respectable audiences of about 200 people, the 2005 event, expanded to an all-day format, attracted an estimated 1500. The dramatic re-enactment, performed twice, anchored a full day’s worth of music, craft exhibits, and ethnic food preparation, all tied to themes of African-American culture. The attendees, mostly families, came predominantly from the African-American neighborhoods on either side of the river. Sporadically throughout the day, bicyclists on the Riverfront Trail stumbled upon the celebration by chance and also joined in the festivities. Building off the success of the anniversary celebration, project organizers scheduled additional riverside events over the summer and fall of 2005 for school groups, community organizations, and neighborhood youth. The site has also been made available for family reunions, and several such gatherings have already been held there. The expectation is that within a year or two, this once neglected parcel of northern riverfront property will be utilized by the local residents three or four days per week.

The Old North St. Louis History Project

A mile downstream from the Freedom Crossing, another public history initiative strove to reconnect local residents to the waterfront at the same time the Meachum project was taking shape. Unlike the architects of the Freedom Crossing, residents of Old North St. Louis harbored no illusions of converting their portion of the riverfront into a national tourist destination. Rather, they hoped to use the rich history of the waterfront to brand their neighborhood as a historic district. A preservationist agenda, focused on the maintenance and rehabilitation of old homes, inclined the Old North St. Louis history project toward a local and regional audience, which simplified the task of constructing a relevant narrative. Still, residents wrestled with how to present aspects of the past that might portray their neighborhood in an unflattering light. Although uncovering the waterfront’s historical relationship to the neighborhood strengthened the sense of identity and purpose among local residents, the project’s parochial orientation posed serious challenges in terms of securing external funding and thus attracting interest beyond the neighborhood.

Typical of inner-city neighborhoods, Old North St. Louis suffered from severe depopulation and disinvestment in the decades immediately following World War II. White suburban flight was the major culprit, but federal urban renewal programs and interstate highway construction accounted for the demolition of many homes, shops, and churches, thus accelerating the exodus of people and capital. In 1981, a dedicated group of longtime residents and more recent rehabbers sought to stem the tide of urban decay by forming the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group. Historic preservation quickly emerged as a cornerstone of their efforts to stabilize the neighborhood. To nourish an appreciation for the significance and beauty of the nineteenth-century structures that remained, the Restoration Group organized house tours and pushed for the neighborhood’s inclusion on the National Historic Register. In 2000, the homeowners’ association collaborated with the University of Missouri–St. Louis to procure a $400,000 Community Outreach Partnership Center grant from the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. A major component of the grant advanced the neighborhood’s preservation agenda. Working with students and faculty at the university, residents conducted research on the neighborhood’s history and created vehicles for disseminating that research to neighbors as well as the wider St. Louis community. A citizen advisory committee convened on a monthly basis to establish goals, devise research strategies, and review work in progress. Formal presentations at Restoration Group meetings served as a forum for wider community feedback. The project culminated in the production of a video documentary, a booklet, a self-guided tour of the neighborhood, and a community museum.

Among the four final products, the self-guided history trail promoted the cause of preservation agenda by portraying the neighborhood’s stores, churches, streets, parks, factories, schools, and homes as overlooked treasures. Wher-
ever possible, pivotal events and developments were coupled with extant structures. A row of vernacular homes on Palm Street, for example, referenced the shifting ethnic composition of the local population; the remains of a municipal bath house were employed to describe changing hygienic practices. In addition to drawing attention to decaying and vacant properties in dire need of restoration, the tour showcased successful examples of adaptive re-use to provide inspiration. To cultivate a sense of attachment to the built environment among all segments of the community, the project took special care in populating the trail with sites that spoke to the heritage of all social groups currently inhabiting Old North St. Louis.

The waterfront represented an intriguing target for special attention, given the proximity and popularity of Confluence Greenway’s bicycle trail. Not only did the trail promise a steady supply of potential visitors, but it also offered an amenity that could enhance the quality of life for Old North St. Louis residents. Initially, however, residents were not predisposed toward claiming the waterfront as part of their neighborhood heritage. Although the river is but a short walk from the neighborhood, it might as well be on another planet. Following the construction of an interstate highway paralleling the river in the late 1950s, the intervening strip of land became exclusively industrial in character, and the heart of community life migrated one-half mile to the west. The paucity of remaining residential structures swept the waterfront district off the radar screen of preservation possibilities, and the gritty landscape of tangled rail tracks, warehouses, scrap yards, and factories clashed with the quaint and quiet domestic image the Restoration Group wanted to cultivate, especially among potential home-buyers. Practical and programmatic considerations, however, convinced the citizen advisory committee to subject the waterfront area to explicit interpretation. By incorporating the industrial district into the history trail, the committee hoped to keep the attention of cyclists as they detoured from the Riverfront Trail toward the heart of the neighborhood. Indeed, it envisioned historical exposition as an opportunity to portray the area as something other than ugly and forbidding. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an investigation of waterfront development facilitated the promotion of a distinct local identity by enabling the project to trace a continuous path back to the beginnings.

Residents took great pride in the fact that Old North St. Louis originated as an independent town, separate from the City of St. Louis, and that the Mississippi River was integral to the story of the town’s founding. Incorporated as North St. Louis in 1816, the independent village competed with its neighbor to the south for the river commerce to and from Alton, Illinois. North St. Louis never became the commercial hub its creators imagined, and in 1841 it was annexed by the City of St. Louis. Still, it retained its independent identity and its attachment to the river. Floating rafts of white pine were hauled from the Mississippi, cut at local saw mills, and then crafted into furniture at nearby factories. North St. Louis became the woodworking center of the rapidly growing metropolis. Even after the coming of the railroad, the waterfront
remained a vital part of the neighborhood’s social fabric. Census manuscripts from the late nineteenth century are replete with household heads who made their living on the river, as boatmen, as boat builders, and most often as freight haulers. An early twentieth-century photograph of a neighborhood store advertising the sale of bait suggests that residents also continued to use the river for recreational purposes.53

To obtain a clearer sense of the river’s role in community life and to learn more about other aspects of local history, faculty and students at the University of Missouri-St. Louis conducted interviews with people who had once lived or worked in the area. About 40 subjects, ranging in age from 25 to 90, participated in this oral history project. The interviews revealed that until the construction of the interstate highway in the late 1950s, the river remained an active and compelling social space. Several residents claimed that proximity to the river was one of the most appealing features of the neighborhood. Born in 1950, John Vignali claimed that he “grew up on the river,” spending countless hours watching the river boats and yachts.54 Ruth Gannaway remembered taking walks along the river as a young girl in the 1940s.55 Mike Genovese and his friends routinely rode their bicycles to the waterfront near the sewer outfalls and played in the sand bars until they sunk down to their knees.56 Even people who rarely ventured to the river themselves recalled others who did. Anna Garamella moved into her home on North Market Street in 1940. On warm summer evenings she often sat on her front steps watching the parade of fishermen returning home with their daily catches tied on a string.57

Some recollections about the riverfront were less pleasant. The Mississippi River with its fast current and unpredictable channel migrations could be quite dangerous, and many parents forbade their children from approaching it. James Reid, who attended Dessalines School in the 1920s, was among those who were cautioned to stay away from the river; for the most part, he obeyed his mother’s warnings. Not all of his classmates did likewise. Reid remembered the riverfront as a favorite destination for children playing hooky from school, one of whom drowned in the river.58

Taken together, the stories testified to a neighborhood determined to preserve the waterfront as a social space, even in the face of the city’s concerted policy of converting the northern river corridor into an exclusive zone of in-

54. John Vignali, interviewed by Holly Hughes, 8 November 2002, 7, transcript on file at the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group office, St. Louis, Missouri.
56. Mike Genovese, interviewed by Miranda Rabus, 19 November 2002, 7, transcript on file at the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group office.
57. Anna Garamella, interviewed by Andrew Hurley, 19 March 2003, not transcribed, videotape in author’s possession.
58. James Reid, interviewed by Andrew Hurley, 16 May 2003, 9, transcript on file at the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group office.
dustrial production and cargo transfer. By the late nineteenth century, barges rather than steamboats carried the vast majority of freight passing through the port of St. Louis. Because barges did not accommodate passengers, there was no longer a need to concentrate cargo facilities in the central harbor. When the city decided to modernize and expand its port facilities during World War I, it chose the northern riverfront as the most appropriate locale for the building of a new public terminal. After the war, when the city sought to revive its industrial base to compensate for the alarming flight of capital to suburban municipalities, it again designated the northern riverfront as an ideal locale. The main obstacle to the further industrial development of the riverfront at that point was flooding. In 1955, city leaders found a remedy to the problem by securing federal funding for a flood-control project. Four years later, work began on the construction of a fifty-two-foot flood wall that would protect riverfront property from inundation and make additional land available for manufacturing plants and freight transfer stations.

Before construction could commence, however, the city had to evict several dozen families who made their home on the site. The riverfront was not just a place where people of Old North St. Louis strolled, fished, and played; it was a place where people lived, albeit illegally. In 1950, Louise Thompson moved into a home just a few blocks from the Mississippi River. When asked about her memories of the waterfront, the first image that came to mind was the “cardboard huts” constructed by transient families who encamped on the river. She explained that many of them roamed the neighborhood, going door to door requesting food and part-time work. John Vignali also referred to the “bums” who inhabited the waterfront district in the 1950s. In fact, they belonged to a squatter settlement that dated back to the Great Depression. Cobbling crude shelters out of orange crates and tar paper, dozens of families had established a shanty town alongside the river. They remained a notable presence in the neighborhood until 1959, when city officials evicted them.

The riverfront stories captured in oral interviews, along with information culled from newspaper accounts and archival sources, ultimately translated into a cautionary tale validating the neighborhood’s contemporary preservation agenda. While the early history of the riverfront stamped the neighborhood with a distinctive origin, twentieth-century developments exposed the fragility of an environment that once nurtured community. The appropriation of such a vital social space at the hands of external forces became a clarion call to the defense of what historical landscape remained intact and salvageable. To be


62. “City Authorizes Negotiations With Squatters,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 16 April 1959.
sure, some residents on the local history committee expressed reservations about emphasizing themes of urban decline and adversity that reinforced negative stereotypes about the inner city, which was already stigmatized as a high-crime district. Residents were reluctant to publicize stories about past criminal activity, no matter how colorful or revealing about social relations. One member of the committee questioned the virtue of placing a low-income housing project associated with the War on Poverty on the history trail. Likewise, there was little eagerness to broadcast the history of the riverfront squatter settlement, although there was no overt opposition to doing so. On the other hand, the destructive impact of the highway received prominent coverage in all project products. In addition, the committee decided to begin the neighborhood history trail on the waterfront and incorporate several points of interest, drawing attention to nearby industrial development along it.
In aligning historical interpretation with a local revitalization agenda, the Old North St. Louis history project appeared more effective at solidifying a sense of place among existing residents than in generating interest beyond the neighborhood, although the two goals by no means proved to be mutually exclusive. Without the promise of a splashy flagship tourist destination, the Restoration Group encountered difficulty securing external funds for signage along its history trail. This failure dashed the Restoration Group’s hopes of luring throngs of bicyclists from the Riverfront Trail into the neighborhood. In place of signage, the project relied on Confluence Greenway Trail rangers to distribute brochures to cyclists. Apparently, this strategy produced modest results; Restoration Group members have reported the occasional appearance of bike riders who had veered from the Riverfront Trail. As part of its efforts to galvanize support for its preservation mission within the neighborhood, the Restoration Group also included the brochures, which contain brief descriptions of all points of interest, in welcome baskets for new residents. Through these brochures, along with the free distribution of a neighborhood history booklet and the creation of a small community museum, many Old North St. Louis residents became acquainted with their local heritage.

More than two years after the project’s termination, the Restoration Group continues to express its satisfaction with the outcome, largely based on the impetus and widespread community support it has provided for strategic planning and redevelopment initiatives. Perhaps the strongest praise for the public history program came from a resident who called into a local radio show and observed: “Until we began focusing on our historical roots, our historical context, ideas for redevelopment of our particular neighborhood went absolutely nowhere. . . . But since then, things have begun to snowball.” Specifically, the Restoration Group has embarked on an aggressive program of purchasing endangered historic properties for resale to rehabbers and crafting public-private partnerships for combining the restoration of old homes with the new construction of architecturally consistent townhouses in multi-block redevelopment projects. Although the industrial district along the waterfront has not yet been targeted for residential development, there are indications that, as shall be discussed in the next section, the neighborhood is beginning to reclaim this territory as part of its birthright.

Conclusion: Public History and Community Empowerment

The ascendance of social history and its advocacy of multiple perspectives on the past have prompted some critics to lament the demise of the unified
national narrative. At best, they argue, multiple perspectives produce a messy pastiche of mutually unintelligible stories. At worst, they fragment the production of historical knowledge into detached enclaves, exacerbate social divisions, and weaken the bonds of citizenship.65 Likewise, the democratization of public history contests the monolithic national stories delivered to mass tourist and consumption audiences at places like the downtown St. Louis waterfront. Yet, an approach to public history that accommodates the perspectives and agendas of diverse communities at the grass roots need not splinter the past into mutually impenetrable fragments. It can just as easily expose points of connection among disparate urban audiences where their histories overlap and intersect. Moreover, where public history projects strengthen attachment to shared elements of the metropolitan terrain, they can also facilitate higher levels of social and even political interaction. A messier past may turn out to be a more usable one if it provides more residents of the multicultural metropolis with an understanding of how they arrived at their present situation and where they might choose to go in the future.

Indeed, in the riverfront wards of north St. Louis, a new historical consciousness has inspired residents to political action and coalition-building in defense of public access to the river. Toward the end of 2003, north-side residents learned that the St. Louis mayor’s office had endorsed a plan to expand a wholesale produce market complex across Branch Street, the only public thoroughfare leading directly from north-side neighborhoods to the riverfront. Since 1953, the region’s major fruit and vegetable wholesalers have occupied a strip of warehouses and loading docks just one block from the Mississippi River, stretching from North Market Street to a point near Branch Street. While “Produce Row” has flourished over the past fifty years, other nearby companies have abandoned their multi-storied manufacturing plants in favor of sprawling horizontal facilities in suburban areas that facilitate the movement of materials and the assembly of product. In June 2002, the St. Louis Development Corporation, the city’s economic development agency, hired a planning firm to devise a strategy for reviving economic activity in a 1,100-acre tract of land along the northern riverfront. In its final report, completed in December 2003 with the input of local business leaders, the planning firm recommended the creation of “Produce Row Business Campus” that would build on existing economic strengths and target new opportunities in food-related commerce, specifically value-added packaging. Crucial to the success of the business park, however, was the construction of large, horizontal buildings for light manufacturing and storage. According to the final master plan, the ideal setting for new construction lay just north of the existing Produce Row, covering Branch Street and thus interrupting pedestrian and vehicular traffic between the waterfront and the residential neighborhoods further west. Passing underneath the Mark Twain Expressway, across the industrial corridor, and through the

floodwall via a gate, Branch Street is the only remaining direct connection between St. Louis’s north-side neighborhoods and the Mississippi River.\(^{66}\)

The news was a devastating blow to sponsors of the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing and the Old North St. Louis history trail, because both projects relied on Branch Street as the primary point of public access to the waterfront. In contrast to previous eras, when industrial and commercial expansion along the riverfront north and south of downtown elicited little formal resistance, the fall of 2003 saw citizens mobilize to oppose the plan. Indeed, groups that had little previous history of cooperation found themselves aligned on the issue of saving Branch Street. Armed with letters of support from the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group and other north-side neighborhood associations representing the predominantly low-income African-American population in the area, Doug Eller of the Grace Hill Settlement House took the case to City Hall. At meetings with representatives from the mayor’s office and the St. Louis Development Corporation, Eller, along with Grace Hill’s executive director, Theresa Mayberry Dunn, explained how the expansion of Produce Row would further sever the riverfront from the community and jeopardize two well-supported historic preservation projects. The campaign to save Branch Street also received vocal support from Trailnet, the largely white, middle-class organization that spearheaded the riverfront bike trail. Over the next two years, the informal coalition continued its work by trying to woo local aldermanic representatives and prominent local business leaders.\(^{67}\)

At the time of this writing, the fate of Branch Street remains undetermined. Regardless of the outcome, the struggle to preserve access to the river testifies to the power of history to mobilize citizens on behalf of alternative priorities for waterfront land use. North St. Louisans have re-imagined their relationship to the Mississippi River, seeing it once again as a vital part of their communities. In the process, they have rediscovered one another.

Andrew Hurley is professor of history at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. He is the author of *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980*, and *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture*. He is currently co-writing a book on the use of public history and public archaeology in revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods.

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