

SPECIAL REPORT

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B. KENNETH SIMON CENTER FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

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The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites: Rediscovering America's Heritage

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The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites *encourages Americans to visit historic sites to celebrate America's 250th birthday and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Our heritage is not intangible, irrelevant, or stale. It teaches us who we are and invites us to participate in an ongoing adventure. We are asked to follow the Wright Brothers, to pass time with Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, and to set America toward a new birth of freedom. America is a place, a people, and a proposition sustained by our choices, commitments, and character. As the first 250 years come to a close, America's citizens face a question: Who will we decide to become?*

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

—Abraham Lincoln¹

As part of its observance of America's 250th birthday in 2026, The Heritage Foundation released *The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites* on October 25, 2025.² The *Guide* evaluates notable places like battlefields, museums, and historic homes across this great nation. These are places that tell the American story and capture who we are as a people. America's 250th birthday is an occasion to revisit them.

This *Special Report* summarizes the *Guide's* findings. It highlights some of the best, worst, and most noteworthy sites. It points to developing trends in grading, funding, and ideological leaning. Finally, it makes the case for why these sites are valuable and worth defending as centers of civic education. America is defined by the intertwining of people, principles, and place. The

Guide conveys that reality, demonstrating how America's heartland reflects its principles and the character of the America people.

There is something about visiting the reverent and unassuming tomb of America's indispensable man, George Washington. Or being at Independence Hall, where the Founders pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Or standing in Montpelier's library where James Madison imagined the Constitution.

Americans came together even before the miracle of Philadelphia and before the Declaration of Independence. They formed themselves into a people at Plimoth, Jamestown, and Colonial Williamsburg as they practiced the art of self-government, drew on the Western tradition, and found their rights in natural law.

The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites tells this story. It is our story, and it is worth remembering both this year and in the 250 years to come. Happy birthday, America.

About the *Guide*

The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites evaluates significant and popular historic sites, places like battlefields, forts, state capitols, museums, and presidential homes. It includes destinations like Mark Twain's house, Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, and even an old penitentiary.

The *Guide* tells the American story—replete with that story's principles—through place. It illuminates the American character: the principled commitments, enterprising spirit, and frontier resilience as well as the shared sacrifices, literature, and architecture of America.

Each site tells a unique story that often combines the uplifting, tragic, and notable. Lincoln and the soldiers of Gettysburg gave America a new birth of freedom, an atonement for the American sin of slavery. Many sites naturally incorporate varying elements. The Buffalo Bill Center of the West features both cowboy culture and Native American life.

There currently are more than 125 sites on the map with at least one in each state. Every site has its own page with information about the main tours and exhibits on offer, tips for families, recommended readings, and a section that explains the place's significance.

The Heritage Foundation contracted with local citizens and notable scholars whose areas of study are relevant to the sites they reviewed. For example, an architect wrote the *Guide's* evaluation of the Minnesota State Capitol. Much can be learned by simply perusing these evaluations. They

capture the imagination, making readers want to be in the room where history happened, and convey the richness of the American heritage.

One of the *Guide*'s principal objectives is to encourage Americans to visit historic sites to celebrate America 250—to go to the places where history was made. The *Guide* can be used before, during, and after visits to set expectations, provide cautions, and enhance the experience.

Heritage reviewers are equipped to identify historical inaccuracies. Many visitors go to historic sites to learn about an aspect of history or an important figure that is unfamiliar to them. But distortions at historic sites are not always obvious. To draw attention to such issues, each site on the *Guide* receives a grade of A (good), B (mixed), or C (poor).

The visitor to any historic site should be able to go on the main tours and view the main exhibits and come away with a reasonable understanding of what makes that place notable. Sites can and often should have other offerings, but they must cover their core significance, and other offerings should be relevant and not overwhelming.

Grades are based on accuracy and comprehension, ideological bias, and thematic proportionality. Reviews point out instances where sites run afoul of those standards. This brings third-party accountability to the historic site regardless of who owns and operates it.

Why a site receives the grade it receives is more important than the grade itself, which functions as a shorthand signal. There is room for reasonable disagreement about the content and emphasis of historic sites, and evaluations accordingly adopt a modest tone.

Grades are not static and can change as sites improve and address problems identified by reviewers—or as sites fail to do so or worsen. A form allows visitors to indicate whether a site has changed since it was last reviewed, to voice disagreement, or to recommend another site to evaluate, allowing the project to be crowdsourced to the American public.

Distortions of history arise from whitewashing or overemphasizing shortcomings in a propagandistic fashion. Neither is acceptable. When it comes to the Founding Fathers, for example, fair portrayals should convey that they were great but flawed men who made America's existence possible.

No other resource is quite like *The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites*. It is user-friendly and summarizes tours and exhibits up front. Similar websites either are not always easy to navigate or include only a particular selection of historic sites. It is our intention to add to and update the *Guide* so that it will serve as a resource during America's 250th anniversary and beyond, to be shared across generations.

The Importance of Civic and Public Education

Fundamentally, historic sites are centers of civic education, which is about familiarizing citizens not simply with the laws and structures of government but with the underlying principles that animate those laws and the narrative that is the American story. It aims at preserving the American Republic, invites citizens to share in that work, and cultivates virtue, unity, and gratitude.

When injustices in our laws and institutions arise, civic education moves toward a greater fulfillment of America's principles, but it does not seek to replace those principles. A nation dedicated to self-government, human equality, and inalienable rights is fundamentally good and worth perpetuating.

Both whitewashing history and fostering undue resentment over past injustices are antithetical to civic education. Deliberation is characteristic of a free society, and propaganda undermines the habits of engaging honestly with each other. Much can be learned from the high and low points of history, as well as the sheer complexity of events.

Fixating on shortcomings and using past hypocrisies as ideological cudgels encourage resentment and minimize personal and group agency. Reducing some Americans to the role of "oppressor" and others to the status of "oppressed" blinds us not only to the achievements of the Founding Fathers, but also to the "role that black Americans played in making the nation's constitutional principles and deepest values of equality and freedom real and tangible."³

Recognizing and celebrating the generations of Americans who have moved us toward better fulfillment of the principles expressed so eloquently in the Declaration of Independence includes acknowledging that we fell short in the past. That fulfillment is ongoing but never permanent. Such an approach is fundamentally different from purposefully using deficiencies to discredit the nation. Civic education cultivates a moral imagination that coheres; grievance politics pits citizens against one another.

Citizen formation is imperative for the health of the Republic. As Founder Mercy Otis Warren wrote, "the education of youth, both public and private," includes "industrious and economical habits," "moral character," and "virtues" and is "necessary for the happiness of individuals and of nations."⁴

Civic education doesn't happen only in the classroom. Historic sites are places of public pedagogy, part of a broader cultural education that

signals what we honor and abhor. Such education is ongoing, continuing past high school.

Preserving and visiting historic sites inculcates gratitude. These sites familiarize citizens with the American story and aspects of the American character, which is unifying and uplifting. Maintaining the homes and legacies of figures like George Washington who helped to build America is an act of gratitude.

Places dedicated to statesmen, inventors, adventurers, and artists inspire. They showcase the spirit of American enterprise, and they serve the human need—and the need of children in particular—for role models and heroes to emulate. As reviewer Diana Schaub writes of Frederick Douglass, “He embraced the ‘saving principles’ of the Declaration of Independence and the noble aims of the Constitution. His patriotism could be a model for us today, as we grapple with how to combine love for country with honesty about our shortcomings.”⁵

Estates like Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier stand for more than individual legacies, and the battle over them is about more than Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. It is about the American character—maintaining our collective history and memory of who we are as a people. The American heritage includes the deeds of remarkable leaders like Jefferson and Madison, but it also includes such products of their genius as the Declaration and the Constitution. Sites should convey what those documents mean for America’s citizens, informing them of their rights and responsibilities.

By visiting historic sites, American children cultivate their social imagination. They encounter the national narrative that will help to shape their sense of history and their identity as citizens.

Visits foster what Alexis de Tocqueville distinguished as “instinctive” and “reflective” patriotism. We love our home as our own, and that “love intermingles with the taste for old customs, with respect for ancestors and memory of the past.”⁶ Reflective patriotism—more rational, mature, and sustaining—leads individuals to realize that their well-being is tied to the laws and institutions of their nation. By learning about the principles of their country, citizens come to love their country more. Historic sites naturally support instinctive patriotism, and those that are devoted to civic education develop reflective patriotism as well.

Historic sites are also extraordinary in that they are often destinations for families across multiple generations of citizens. They offer common experiences and promote national unity through the generations and over partisan lines. Memories that we share with family members and fellow

citizens, that we can speak about and look back on in later years, foster civic friendship and goodwill. Such sentiments contribute to a “complex of charities” that bind the citizens of a republic.⁷ As John Quincy Adams wrote, the sympathies that are rooted in familial bonds, “spread through the social and moral propinquities of the neighbor and friend, to the broader and more complicated relations of countryman and fellow-citizens.”⁸

This is critical as the world around us becomes more disembodied, personally customizable, and populated with screens. Historic sites remind us that America is a place (though not only a place), and visits to the sites remind us that the embodied nature of human beings matters. That experience awakens the senses and lives on in our hearts and minds. Just as Mark Twain himself captured America’s imagination, “Most children will find [his] house irresistible, as appealing as a giant gingerbread fantasy,” as Wilfred McClay notes in his review of the site.⁹

Many sites include live reenactments or allow children to learn a trade like candle-making.

Families can visit the cheese factory started by President Calvin Coolidge’s father, share a pint at a replica of an Irish pub at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, or “ride the White Pass Summit Excursion” near Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, “passing waterfalls, tunnels, and trestles while learning the story of the stampeders.”¹⁰ These excursions remind us of our own and our nation’s physicality and character.

Examples of Results

The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites identifies various forms of historical distortions. Some sites include exhibits that are irrelevant. Others mislead by omitting pertinent information or contradicting primary sources. Sites may fixate on a particular aspect of American history or be inconsistent in their tone. For example:

- The Nebraska History Museum earns a “C” in part for its inconsistent portrayals. According to reviewer Steve Bullock:

The first floor divides Nebraska history into seven eras, six of which focus on Native peoples, while only one covers the past 300 years of settlement through modern times. The Native-focused eras highlight cultural achievements and daily life, but omit mention of tribal conflicts, leaving

the impression of harmonious societies contrasted against negative portrayals of European settlers.¹¹

- The National World War II Museum in New Orleans includes an exhibit entitled “Forces of Freedom at Home and Abroad (1945–Present).” Heritage scholar Wilson Beaver writes that the exhibit is “entirely out of place in a museum ostensibly about World War II.” Signage is “primarily about the feminist movement, gay rights movement, and the civil rights movement from the 1950s to the 1970s, and features figures like Gloria Steinem....”¹²
- The Molly Brown House and Museum in Denver, Colorado, has an “Acquirement of Culture” exhibit that “maintains a heavy focus on the discriminatory immigration policies of late 19th and early 20th century America, despite the fact that these policies had little impact on the life of a second-generation Irish immigrant like Brown.”¹³

Of the sites currently available, 91 receive an “A” grade. This does not mean that tour guides are immune from making errant comments or that there are no problems here or there at those sites. (See Lucas Morel’s review of Abraham Lincoln’s Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, for an example.) But the American public can still go to them and learn something substantive about American history or the American national character. The owners and operators of these sites are stewards who deserve our gratitude.

“A” sites of particular interest for colonial history and the Founding include Adams National Historical Park, Quincy, Massachusetts; Fort Moultrie National Historical Park, Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina; Historic Jamestown, Jamestown, Virginia; Hubbardton Battlefield State Historic Site, Hubbardton, Vermont; Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Maryland State House, Annapolis, Maryland; Minute Man National Historical Park, Concord, Massachusetts; Morristown National Historical Park, Morristown, New Jersey; George Washington’s Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, Virginia; National Archives, Washington, DC; National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Noah Webster House, West Hartford, Connecticut; Paul Revere House, Boston, Massachusetts; Princeton Battlefield State Park, Princeton, New Jersey; and Yorktown, Virginia.

There are too many “A” sites to list them all in detail, but a few of varying types are worth highlighting.

Mount Vernon earns honors for being one of the most popular national sites (receiving approximately 1 million visitors per year) and for preserving the legacy of the indispensable man. Proper attention is afforded to George Washington's life and accomplishments, primary sources are attended to carefully, and tours and exhibits adopt a modest tone. The history of slavery is rightly and fairly incorporated. Offerings for children and adolescents aim at genuine education by encouraging visitors to put themselves in Washington's shoes, make their own decisions, and appreciate the complexity of his historical context.

Among the smaller sites, Noah Webster's House stands out for its strengths. The Connecticut site is well-maintained, is free from ideological contamination, and focuses on Webster's importance. Reviewer Reverend Alan R. Crippen II writes that:

Noah Webster's story reminds us that, in the aftermath of the war for independence and the framing of the new republic's constitution, there yet remained a significant cultural and civilizational task: to make a great people and nation.... Today, he is acclaimed as a lexicographer and for the dictionary that made his name famous, but that project was only a piece of a larger national project designed to make America great.¹⁴

Language helps to form and reflect the character of a nation, and the *Guide* draws attention to those sometimes underappreciated aspects of a people.

Places like the Maryland State House and the Minnesota State Capitol are included in the *Guide* not only for being governmental centers, but for housing notable documents and works of art and for their architectural beauty. The "elegant classical design" of the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates chambers "features an unusual Italian marble whose gold and black streaks correspond to colors on the state flag."¹⁵ The Minnesota State Capitol is "the first major architectural masterpiece by Cass Gilbert, one of the most influential American architects of the era."¹⁶ According to architect Matthew Enquist's evaluation:

The Capitol's decorative largescale murals provide an expansive visual history of the United States, depicting themes ranging from the Civil War to westward expansion. Many of the artists were among the most significant painters of their era, several of whom were recruited following their celebrated contributions to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.¹⁷

Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg, Maryland, is reviewed by Charles Murray, who has lived near the Civil War battlefield since 1989 and has given dozens of tours to friends. The evaluation itself reads like a tour as he navigates around the Antietam grounds and battlefield, visitors' center, museum, trails, and website and offers extensive tips for "nearby offerings." Murray writes that:

The fascination of any battlefield lies in one's imagination—recreating in the mind's eye what happened at different points on the peaceful fields the visitor is viewing. For teenagers who are interested in the Civil War, military matters in general, or stories of heroism, Antietam can be a wonderful destination because those acts of the imagination will come easily.¹⁸

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Skagway, Alaska, and Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Powell County, Montana, tell the history of the Alaskan Gold Rush and life on the frontier, and their reviews capture the American spirit of adventure.

At the other end of the spectrum, seven sites receive a "C": the Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts; Harriet Beecher Stowe Center for Literary Activism, Hartford, Connecticut; Montpelier, Montpelier Station, Virginia; National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC; National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; Nebraska History Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska; and Washington State History Museum, Tacoma, Washington.

Montpelier falls short in each category of accuracy and comprehension, ideological bias, and proportionality and is perhaps the worst site in the *Guide*. Some of its problems are not obvious. Montpelier's singular exhibit on the Constitution focuses on slavery and insinuates that the Constitution's Domestic Violence Clause is about slave revolts. The clause certainly would have applied to such occurrences, but maintaining order is a basic governmental power.

The event that precipitated the Constitutional Convention was Shays's Rebellion, an armed uprising about taxes. Shays's Rebellion demonstrated that the Articles of Confederation were too weak and America needed a new constitution. In addition to ignoring that historical context, Montpelier's staff list five slave revolts to support their thesis. Three of the revolts happened after the Constitution was written.

Montpelier currently boasts no exhibits on James Madison. Though he is widely regarded as the "Father of the Constitution," Madison's contributions are mentioned only through a brief video in the visitors' center and in

the final room of the house tour. The rest of the tour is devoted to Dolley and other residents, slavery, hospitality, and the contents of the house. Yet there is enough material about Madison to fill several exhibits. Madison wrote the Bill of Rights, the Virginia Plan that gave structure to the Constitution, and many of the most significant *Federalist Papers*. He was a champion of freedom of conscience and served in various notable political positions including as Speaker of the United States House of Representatives and President of the United States.

While slavery and other elements should be part of Montpelier's offerings, Madison is the most notable figure who lived at Montpelier, and people visit the home to learn about him and the Constitution. Past and present Montpelier leaders, however, have said that Americans come to Montpelier to "worship" a President and a document.¹⁹ Those leaders have no interest in "honoring a 'dead white president and a dead white president's Constitution'" and think they need "to act 'less like a bulldozer and more like a termite that undermined a building's foundation, destroying it from within before tearing it down.'"²⁰

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center for Literary Activism furnishes another example of a "C" site. "The Stowe Center receives an historical accuracy grade of 'C' for reasons that are reflected in the site's very name," writes historian Wilfred McClay. "A visitor who comes to the Stowe Center hoping to learn more about the life and work of an important American author, and about her life as a woman in full, will be bitterly disappointed by this site."²¹ More "attention is paid to African Americans who distinguished themselves in opposition to slavery than to Stowe herself," and the hour-long tour challenges visitors in "a conversational format" to "make connections between inequities then and now."²² Such occurrences seem more common at historic sites today than in the past. Tour guides seek not simply to give an account of history but to provoke visitors into having modern political conversations.

The neglect of Stowe is particularly disappointing as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the bestselling novel of the 19th century, second only to the Bible in total book sales. Stowe embodied the steadfast character and public spiritedness of American women, and her eloquent and disquieting depictions directed the conscience of a nation.

There is a certain amount of variation within the "A," "B," and "C" categories. Some, for example, earn weaker rather than stronger "B's." Notably problematic "B's" include Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Park, Topeka, Kansas; Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Virginia; Gateway Arch National Park, St. Louis, Missouri; Historic Fort Snelling,

Saint Paul, Minnesota; Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia; John Dickinson Plantation, Dover, Delaware; National Museum of American History, Washington, DC; National World War II Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana; Plimoth Patuxet Museums, Plymouth, Massachusetts; and Strawberry Banke Museum, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Colonial Williamsburg deemphasizes the colonial and Revolutionary history that makes it unique. It is difficult to piece together that history without prior knowledge. There are some proportionality issues. For example, depending on the season, figures like a George Washington reenactor give a speech once or twice per day for 30 minutes, but the hour-long tour on slavery is offered six times per day.

Stage performances can be particularly ideological with actors injecting political commentary to “provoke” audience members. In addition, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation established a Gender and Sexual Diversity Research Committee in 2019, and specialty programs in June and October include LGBTQIA content.

Reviewer Christopher DeMuth writes that the John Dickinson Plantation is devoted “more to the lives and daily routines of plantation slaves and other workers than to Dickinson himself” despite the fact that “Dickinson was a pivotal, uniquely interesting American Founder and merits much more attention at his only national memorial.”²³ The plantation website unaccountably emphasizes Dickinson—the only Founder to free his slaves during his lifetime—as a “hypocritical enslaver.” Beyond that, the site’s “Plantation Stories Project” is part of a larger program that includes ‘Descendant Community Engagement’ and ‘Ending Erasure: Recognizing African Americans in the Cultural Landscape’—initiatives for ‘putting DEAI goals [diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion] into action.’”²⁴

The only exhibits at Monticello dedicated to Thomas Jefferson are small and focus on him as an architect and scientist and the building of Monticello. Such information is relevant and accurate but does not get at Jefferson’s contributions to America. He was Vice President, President, legislator and governor, Secretary of State, and Minister to France. He wrote the Virginia Bill for Religious Freedom and founded the University of Virginia with Madison. He also drafted the Declaration of Independence, yet Monticello does not explain the meaning and significance of that great document even as America celebrates its 250th birthday.

The National World War II Museum “spends an excessive amount of time on divisive racial themes, including topics that have nothing to do with World War II.” Certainly, “[s]ome discussion of historic discrimination

makes sense, but the museum elevates racial themes above messages of American unity and victory.”²⁵

The Strawberry Banke Museum exhibits problems with ideological bias and comprehension. Historian D. G. Hart notes that the museum lacks an orienting narrative. Some recent additions on “English colonists, Native Americans, and a Seacoast African American Cultural Center” seem “forced and remote from the neighborhood’s history.” All of them “seem aimed at correcting impressions of the settlers’ innocence and accomplishments.”²⁶ The site has a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging (DEIAB) Task Force, and staff name tags include preferred personal pronouns.

Grading Trends

While 125-plus sites still constitute a small percentage of the historic sites scattered throughout the country, some trends are emerging from the grading.

The Smithsonian museums, which are not technically owned by the federal government but receive most of their funding from it, are among the worst sites. Earning a “B,” the National Museum of American History is a hodgepodge and includes much material that many would not prioritize. Both the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of African American History and Culture earn “C’s.”

Smithsonian museums suffer from being quasi-federal institutions located in Washington, DC. Unlike places like battlefields, there are fewer natural guardrails attached to such expansive museums. Visitors have an idea of what to expect when they go to Mount Vernon. Such sites aim to tell a particular story or an aspect of history in-depth.

The National Museum of American History could include a great deal, but its offerings are a mile wide and an inch deep. Amid such ambiguity, museums become more subject to the whims and ideologies of curators. Revealingly, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch has written that “DEAI is integral to excellence in museum practice. FULL STOP.”²⁷

In contrast to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, other sites around the country that tell more localized and specific stories do well. Among those that have earned “A” grades are the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park in Atlanta, Georgia; National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee; Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Tuskegee, Alabama; Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in

Jackson, Mississippi; and Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, DC.

As Congress debates the building of a Smithsonian Women’s Museum (which already includes a man who identifies as a woman) and Latino Museum,²⁸ these observations raise some questions. For example:

- Are we better off telling such history through a national museum or the places where history actually happened?
- Would a larger percentage of the public learn about the contributions of women if that history were incorporated into the National Museum of American History or spun off into a separate museum?

In 2025, the National Museum of American History received 1.8 million visitors, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture received 1.4 million visitors.²⁹ Families probably choose to visit a Smithsonian museum when they come to DC, and those with young children likely walk through quickly.

The equivalents of Smithsonian museums on the state level—institutions focused on the history of a particular state—are a mixed bag. The Nebraska and Washington state museums receive “C’s,” and the North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum, South Carolina State Museum, Oklahoma History Center Museum, and West Virginia State Museum receive “A’s.”

Such sites are subject to some of the same defects as the Smithsonian museums, though to a lesser degree. Many of the sites owned by their respective states and with a narrower focus earn an “A.” Places like The Alamo, Fort Adams, or the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum fall into this category. John Dickinson’s Plantation, owned by the State of Delaware, is a notable exception.

The most popular sites in the country boast varying grades. The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, Independence Hall, Mount Vernon, and Gettysburg receive “A’s.” The Gateway Arch, Colonial Williamsburg, and Monticello receive “B’s.” The National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Portrait Gallery receive “C’s.”

Overall, the National Park Service (NPS) is doing a reasonable job. More than 30 percent of the sites in the *Guide* are owned or operated by the NPS, and none of them receives a “C.” Nine receive a “B,” indicating that there are some problems. Given some of the ideological assumptions that animate the NPS, such sites are worth monitoring carefully.

Ideological Trends: Toward Activism

Places like Montpelier and the Stowe Center for Literary Activism evince a fundamental shift in how museums and historic sites understand their purpose. Rather than being centers of civic education that provide citizens and families with an informative experience, museums and other institutions are moving toward engaging in activism. This undermines the fundamental value of historic sites. There is nothing inherently wrong with activism, but any group of people is free to rally for a cause or establish an institution focused on a given issue. There are many such organizations, but there is only one Monticello. Such sites should focus on their unique significance. Making them ideological does a disservice to the American people.

Higher education is the source of the trends that affect what the public learns—or fails to learn—from America's historic sites. Curators with degrees in museum studies from predominantly liberal institutions of higher education all too often have adopted a postmodernist lens that has resulted in the telling of history through power structures. This is often reductive and causes much of the American story be overlooked. Injustices that fit oppressor/oppressed group contexts are given outsized attention; questions involving civic first principles are sometimes disregarded.

In addition, there is often a disconnect between academic trends and what the average American wants to know. Reviewer Richard Samuelson observes that the National Museum of American History reflects the training of academic historians. Offerings tend to “focus not on what the common people find interesting, but instead on historic ‘firsts’ that demonstrate ‘progress’ over time.” A “display of Carl Nassib’s NFL jersey,” for example, notes that Nassib “was the first openly gay athlete to play in a regular season NFL game.” Samuelson asks: “Why that choice? If one asked Americans which NFL jersey to feature in a very prominent place, that would not be the one to choose.”³⁰

The adoption of activist ideologies seems widespread across the museum profession. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), which is composed of 35,000 museums and museum professionals, contends that “the collective museum community” should build “more diverse, equitable, accessible, inclusive, and anti-racist museums” to “help build a more just and equitable world.”³¹ DEAI is integral to this practice, and experts should shift away from “white-dominant characteristics of perfection, risk aversion, and conflict avoidance.”³² Six of the seven “C” sites in the *Guide* are affiliated with the AAM, and Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch co-authored the previously cited “Excellence in DEAI” report.

Despite gender ideology being a modern concept, sites like Colonial Williamsburg and the Museum of the American Revolution celebrate Pride Month,³³ and Strawberry Banke hosts the annual Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Pride Festival.³⁴

Other sites assume the controversial link between Civil Rights and the sexual revolution, including LGBTQ+ efforts.

- The Emily Dickinson Museum has hosted events that “celebrate abortion, homosexuality, and a whole host of progressive causes, using Emily Dickinson’s poetry to promote this world view.”³⁵
- The Museum of the American Revolution frames the Revolution as an “unfinished idea” that includes issues like “gay liberation” and “Occupy Wall Street” protests. In June 2025, the museum offered an hour-long walking tour “exploring the revolutionary story of the self-proclaimed Public Universal Friend, a nonbinary leader of a new religion in the 1770s.”³⁶
- At the National Portrait Gallery, “The Struggle for Justice” exhibit “elevates LGBTQ+ rights to the same plane as civil rights for black Americans, a premise with which many Americans would disagree.”³⁷
- At Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Site, “[t]here is a ‘Wall of Courage’ honoring others whom the exhibit links to the civil rights movement, including Gloria Steinem and a same-sex couple (Kris Perry and Sandy Stier) who challenged Proposition 8 in California.”³⁸
- At the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York, “[s]ome plaques in the [Wesleyan] chapel unfortunately come to hasty and controversial conclusions, such as associating Seneca Falls with the Equal Rights Amendment and modern-day abortion rights activism.” One of these plaques “reminds visitors that the ‘struggle continues for basic rights’ including ‘reproductive rights’ with a photograph of a pro-abortion protest.”³⁹

These last two sites are owned by the National Park Service, and this is not a coincidence. The NPS has adopted a progressive view of “rights” and the civil rights movement. For example:

The 1998 creation of Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site was the foundation for a series of studies that sought to identify, evaluate, and preserve properties associated with the modern Civil Rights Movement, which in turn lent relevance to consideration of places associated with women, Native Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos, and the LGBTQ communities.⁴⁰

The Stonewall National Monument was designated a historic site by presidential proclamation in 2016. The site played a pivotal role in the “nation’s LGBTQ civil rights movement” and inspired “generations of activists.”⁴¹

Some places even encourage children to become activists, attempting to rally them for specific causes instead of offering a genuine education in republican self-government. *Anti-Racist Baby* and *How to Be an Antiracist* appear in bookstores.

The children’s exhibit at the Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Site asks: “How can YOU respectfully challenge injustice found in school systems around the country?” and “What can you do to...PRO-VOKE...your government to change?”⁴² The one at Montpelier, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), “encourages parents to have conversations with children about race.”⁴³ The exhibit contains books, all recommended by the Southern Poverty Law Center, for children of varying ages.⁴⁴

For grades 3–5, Julius Lester and Rod Brown’s *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* includes “imagination exercises” for “White People,” “African Americans,” and “Whites and Blacks.” For example:

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road...asks children to “[i]magine not the victim, but the aggressor. We may think that we would never whip someone until their flesh cried blood.” But “[e]vil is as mesmerizing as a snake’s eyes. Though difficult, we must imagine our capacity for evil. Unless and until we do, unseen shadows of hung men will blot the walls of our homes.” This text is accompanied by illustrations of an enslaved man hanging from a rope, his back raw and bloodied by lashes from a whip, and the silhouette of a hanged man.⁴⁵

Such efforts (in addition to being horrific) smack of treating children as means, rather than ends. Instead of aiming at civic education and encouraging kids to think for themselves (as Mount Vernon does), some museum operators are attempting to co-opt the youngest Americans for their political causes.

Montpelier's Rubric for Teaching Slavery

Another notable trend is the proliferation of a set of guidelines, a “rubric” for teaching slavery and engaging with descendants.⁴⁶ It was developed by the Montpelier Foundation in partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

Montpelier’s guidelines assert that the descendants of those who were enslaved should enjoy “structural parity” by being able to occupy positions at every level.⁴⁷ Descendants include those “who feel connected to the work the institution is doing, whether or not they know of a genealogical connection.”⁴⁸ Further, “For institutions that interpret slavery, it is not enough simply to discuss the humanity and contributions of the enslaved. It is imperative that these institutions also unpack and interrogate white privilege and supremacy and systemic racism.” Staff should undergo “significant and ongoing anti-racist training (which includes interpreting difficult history, deconstructing and interrogating white privilege, white supremacy, and systemic racism, and engaging visitors on these subjects).”⁴⁹

Aside from changing the purpose of historic sites to promoting activism rather than civic education, Montpelier’s guidelines upend traditional historical standards. They encourage “incorporating essential family oral histories, long dismissed as unreliable resources by many academic historians.” Staff should use “sources to ‘read between the lines’ (even documents that are not on the surface ‘about’ slavery or enslaved people often contain valuable information). Genealogy, oral history, documents, archeology, material culture, study of buildings, community research, and outreach are placed on equal footing.”⁵⁰

Historical standards were established for a reason. Placing sources of variable reliability on “equal footing” is problematic. Oral histories can be valued but merit skepticism and need to be verified with additional documentation.

Human memories and spoken communication are fallible, and they become more so as the years or the number of generations increases. People are biased and can exaggerate, particularly when recounting stories of loved ones. They may not be aware that they are perpetuating inaccuracies.

Montpelier’s guidelines were developed at a 2018 summit with museum leaders, academics, and at least two representatives of the Southern Poverty Law Center in attendance.⁵¹ The hope was that other museums would adopt Montpelier’s standards as their own. The John Dickinson Plantation is employing them in its “Descendant Community Engagement” and “Ending Erasure: Recognizing African Americans in the Cultural Landscape”

projects.⁵² The College of William & Mary is a partner of Colonial Williamsburg and is conducting research in accordance with Montpelier's recommendations.⁵³ The adoption of such guidelines by other historic sites does not bode well for the future of the museum space.

Private Funders

Funding of historic sites and museums is interconnected and complex. These institutions sometimes give to one another or establish in-kind partnerships. Where private funding is concerned, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the major player with other corporate spin-offs like the Ford Foundation also contributing significant donations.

Montpelier is owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has 27 sites open to the public. In 2017, the Trust established the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund, bankrolled by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and George Soros's Open Society Foundations, among others.⁵⁴

The National Trust in turn gives out grants. In 2019, it awarded \$1.6 million to "Organizations Dedicated to Uncovering Untold Stories and Preserving Black History."⁵⁵ That funding was provided by the Mellon Foundation. The National Trust has given to the Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, owned by the National Park Service, and the John Dickinson Plantation, for the purpose of implementing Montpelier's rubric.⁵⁶

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the country's largest donor to the arts and humanities. To provide a sense of its priorities and ideology, the Mellon Foundation has played a significant role in efforts to take down historic monuments and put up new ones. It has committed \$500 million to transformation of "the nation's commemorative landscape to ensure our collective histories are more completely and accurately represented."⁵⁷ According to the foundation's audit, one of the reasons this needs to be done is that there allegedly are no LGBTQ+ individuals on the list of the top 50 individuals most often depicted by monuments.⁵⁸

The foundation notes that there is a "long legacy of communities resisting ideologies through the strategy of monument protest and removal."⁵⁹ The example it points to is the removal of a statue of King George on July 9, 1776. This is revealing. The Revolutionary War was a regime change. Widespread removal of statues is a way to erase collective memory and sever obligations.

The resources of the Mellon Foundation and the influence those resources exert are staggering. In fiscal year (FY) 2024, the National

Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) had a grant budget of \$78.25 million,⁶⁰ while Mellon awarded \$540 million.⁶¹ The Mellon Foundation has given \$14 million to the African American History Museum,⁶² over \$13 million to Colonial Williamsburg,⁶³ \$5 million to Monticello,⁶⁴ and \$5 million to Montpelier,⁶⁵ to name just a few recipients. Mellon also has given to many prominent museums in the DC area, particularly in Virginia.

The Mellon Foundation also exerts its influence by indirect routes. It funds postdoctoral fellows at National Parks to research “how the parks are impacted and/or informed by issues related to gender and sexuality equality, the legacy of the civil rights movement, and the history of labor and productivity.”⁶⁶ As noted above, the “legacy of the civil rights movement” often means LGBTQ+ content.

In 2022, the Mellon Foundation committed over \$13 million for 30 new fellows. One noted that the program “has the potential to transform the stories told at many of the country’s national parks.”⁶⁷

The Mellon Foundation is not the only player in the historic site space. In 2023, the Ford Foundation joined the Alice Walton Foundation, Mellon, and Pilot Philanthropy to establish a “Leadership in Art Museums” initiative committing over “\$11M in funding to museums to increase racial equity in leadership roles....”⁶⁸ Ford also helped to launch the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund in 2017 “in partnership with” the JPB Foundation and George Soros’s Open Society Foundations⁶⁹ and has supported Federal Hall,⁷⁰ Monticello,⁷¹ and Colonial Williamsburg,⁷² among other such recipients. It also has awarded millions to the African American History Museum.⁷³

In 2025, the Ford Foundation’s Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Justice program awarded \$1 million to the National Museum of American History.⁷⁴ The Ford program states that:

[S]tructural inequality based on gender, race, class, disability, and ethnicity persists around the world and is compounded and complicated by today’s challenges. Gender-based violence—rooted in patriarchy and laws, policies, and cultural norms aimed at curtailing rights—inflicts deep, lasting physical, psychological, and economic damage. People of color are disproportionately policed and incarcerated. Immigrants and LGBTQ+ people are targeted simply because of who they are.⁷⁵

The magnitude of funding and the ideological nature of many of the initiatives driven by such entities raise the question of who determines how the American story is told.

The National Park Service was established to preserve “unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”⁷⁶ Its mission is at odds with the motivations of organizations like the Mellon Foundation.

Government Funding

The vast majority of sites featured in the *Guide* have received government funds in one form or another; only about 10 of the 125-plus sites have not received such funding. As already noted, the Smithsonian museums are especially problematic and get most of their funding from the government. Roughly two-thirds of the *Guide*’s sites are owned or operated by government entities.

The National Endowment for the Humanities and Institute of Museum and Library Services award grants to historic sites and museums. They have funded some of the worst sites evaluated in the *Guide* and have supported ideological initiatives. Those harmful grants admittedly represent a small percentage of giving by the NEH and IMLS. Many of the initiatives they back are legitimate. Yet both agencies have given more to “B” and “C” sites than they have given to “A” sites in terms of both the number of grants and the total amount of funding.

Examples of the use of taxpayer funding to push an agenda are plentiful. Emily Dickinson’s home, for example, received almost \$64,000 from the IMLS in 2024 for “[i]mproving accessibility and highlighting stories of domestic labor at the Homestead” to “encourage new audiences including students, LGBTQIA+, and contemporary creatives, artists, and writers seeking inspiration.”⁷⁷

In 2022, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute received almost \$100,000 from the IMLS to apply an intersectional lens to its education programming. It was specified that:

The project team will...enrich the Legacy Youth Leadership Program curriculum with intersectional narratives, develop two archives focused on Latinx and immigrant human and civil rights struggles, update the human rights gallery, and collaborate with members of local tribes to develop a plan for the addition of a land acknowledgement marker.⁷⁸

Montpelier has received nearly \$1 million from the Institute of Museum and Library Services over the years and 12 grants from the NEH since 2004.⁷⁹

A 2019 IMLS grant was for the previously mentioned children’s exhibit, “an interactive exhibition to foster conversations about fairness, justice, and race between children and their caregivers.”⁸⁰

A 2024 IMLS grant was for a new interpretive plan in partnership with the Montpelier Descendants Committee “to engage effectively and ethically in truth-telling about slavery’s role in the shaping of the United States, the legacy it continues to have on race relations in America, and the lingering institutional disparities that prevent Americans from realizing the ideals expressed in our founding documents.”⁸¹ The Montpelier Descendants Committee is a political group that includes nonbiological “descendants,” and Montpelier promotes an anti-racism ideology.

The Plimoth Patuxet Museums offer a case study in government funding over time. Many of the grants received by the site in the past were for neutral projects like repairing the *Mayflower*’s hull or for operating expenses.⁸² More recent grants have focused on the history of indigenous peoples.

In 2020, the Plimoth Plantation was renamed the Plimoth Patuxet Museums (Patuxet was a Wampanoag Native American community). Reviewer Daniel J. Mahoney writes that “[t]he park’s former emphasis on a truly foundational moment in the political and historical experience of all the American people has...been replaced by a multiculturalist framework that tends to prioritize (and romanticize) the life of Native peoples (without ignoring the Pilgrim experience).”⁸³

His assessment is in line with the type and trajectory of grants to Plimoth from the IMLS and NEH. The site received a multi-year \$307,306 grant from the NEH for:

Along the Shores of Change, a multi-year and Museum-wide reinterpretation initiative that transforms the techniques and broadens the stories that Plimoth Plantation uses to communicate Plymouth Colony’s seminal role in shaping America. This new approach explores the Native transnational and pan-European nature of the human landscape in 17th-century New England.⁸⁴

In 2020, the IMLS awarded Plimoth \$227,272 to study “the role of indigenous cultures in the context of early American history” and “how to present that topic in an inclusive, equitable, culturally sensitive, and more historically accurate manner.”⁸⁵ In 2021, Plimoth received \$212,742 to support “educational programs, resources, and events responding to increasing demand for nuanced and fact-based histories told from indigenous perspectives.”⁸⁶

Some of these initiatives may be valid, but they contribute to problems of comprehension and proportionality at places like Plimoth and Monticello.

Conclusion

The Heritage Guide to Historic Sites encourages Americans to visit historic sites to celebrate America 250. Our heritage is not intangible, irrelevant, or stale. It teaches us who we are and invites us to participate in an ongoing adventure. We are asked to follow the Wright Brothers, to pass time with Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, and to set America toward a new birth of freedom.

America is a place, a people, and a proposition sustained by our choices, commitments, and character. As the first 250 years come to a close, America's citizens face a question: Who will we decide to become? At such a crossroads, Abraham Lincoln's words still resound:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.⁸⁷

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