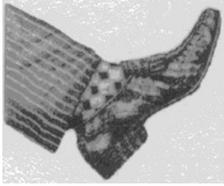


# Planning interpretive walking tours for communities and related historic districts



By  
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With the increasing interest in heritage tourism development, particularly for small communities, there has been growing interest within communities to develop historic walking tours as a “draw”, adding to the collection of activities visitors can do when visiting. These walking tours may be of the downtown area’s historic buildings and related heritage sites, or for a community's historic district. A common question I am asked is “how does one go about planning these kinds of tours?” This short article is designed to service as a *basic guide* in how to plan and design any community walking tour - questions to ask and answer, and some general planning considerations.

## The Basic Planning Process

The basic interpretive planning process for developing walking tours considers the following six steps:

1. **First consider the resource(s)** to be interpreted.
  - With a street map of the community or historic district, do an inventory of the potential stops for a walking tour. Inventory historic homes, historic gardens, architecture, industry and related sites of interest.



Some historic homes may already have an information panel with them, such as the Shrewsbury-Windel House in Madison, IN, which is listed as a National Historic Landmark.

Make a list of all of the sites being considered for possible interpretive stops, and plot their location on the street map.

- Make a list of the main interpretive theme or concepts that **each of the potential interpretive stops would best illustrate**. What is the main interpretive feature or attraction – architecture, the home of a historic personality, the site of historic business, etc? For example, an interpretive theme might be – *The early architecture of our homes and buildings reflects our strong Swedish heritage*. Another theme example might be *Our community buildings reflect three different architectural or cultural styles or influences*. Another theme example might be: *The Ohio River was responsible for our community's early growth and history*. Think of the theme as the ONE THING that, if nothing else, you want the visitor to remember or learn about your community by the end of the tour.
- Do an analysis of all of the sites you are considering and look for those sites that **illustrate** a common theme or story. Also consider the relative importance of each site, facility or home. Is this the BEST example of..., the only example of..., etc.
- From your analysis of all possible stops on a walking tour, begin to cull out the potential stops with this in mind:
  - A walking tour should not take more than an hour to walk – longer walks, particularly on hot summer afternoons, tend to wear the visitor out, particularly older visitors.
  - Try to limit the tour to about 10 stops. This is about the most information that most visitors can remember for “interpretive” stops. Make sure that each stop selected is a good example of the main interpretive theme. You can develop a more detailed “architectural” guide for the “experts” that might want one, but most general tourists just need an “executive summary”.
- Review the stop locations on your street map to look for and consider:
  - Where do you want the tour to start and end (it should be a loop)?
  - Are there any safety issues associated with the tour (streets to cross, etc.)?
  - Will each stop be easy to find or will special directions be needed in the tour book?
  - Will the visitors be in the shade or need rest stops to sit down?
  - Will there be any conflict with tour walkers and property owners?
- Is the interpretive theme or message you are considering interesting? Will visitors “want to know this”? Will you be able to market the tour? What will visitors see, discover and experience on this tour? What are the “Oh My” stories?

2. The next step in the tour planning process is to consider just what you want the tour to accomplish – its **OBJECTIVES**. In this part of the planning process I consider the objectives for the total walking tour, and interpretive objectives for “each stop” on the walking tour. Here are some typical objectives for an “interpretive” walking tour”.

The majority of visitors, upon completing the walking tour, will:

- Be able to describe the three main architectural styles of the buildings in the historic district.
- Be able to describe why only these architectural styles were used and not other ones.
- Learn how this community was associated with a major Civil War battle.
- Understand how the early farming industry affected the community's growth.
- Feel that preserving historic homes and local history is important and benefits everyone.
- Gain a sense of empathy for the early settlers to the area.
- Want to learn more – buy a book on local history.
- Want to attend other interpretive tours or programs.

These are “general” examples of interpretive objectives. The objectives for your walking tour would be specific to your resources and your desired outcomes.



The interpretive objectives for this tour stop, in the historic district of Madison, Indiana, was for visitors to understand the role of gardens for the early settlers, both for food, but also for social functions. We also wanted visitors to learn that they could walk in and enjoy the garden in all seasons.

3. The **WHO** part of our walking tour interpretive plan is where we consider just who the visitors are that we are trying to attract. This is important as it helps focus not only on what interpretive stops we will make on the tour, but the kinds of examples and stories we share with them. Each different market group might need some different “interpretive” considerations. So think about your intended audience – will they be:

- Local residents who have lived here a long time.
- Local residents who are new to the community.
- Local and/or regional school groups (will the interpretation need to reflect the schools social studies or history curriculum?).
- Tourists from within the state (familiar with state history and somewhat familiar with your site, community, history, etc.).
- Tourists from further away or from other states that have no knowledge about your history or community at all.
- Tourists that are older (over 65) – who will be “reminiscing” about their own past?
- Families with young children.
- Architecture students or experts.
- Historic preservationists.

The list can go on, but you get the idea here. You can begin to see how each group might need a little different take on your presentations for each site. The trick is, as you are probably only going to do ONE walking tour brochure, to make your best guess on the market group that will comprise the MAJORITY of the visitors likely interested in learning about or experiencing the stories your walking tour will present. Of course you can do some creative things like develop an adult guide and a children’s guide, or a brochure that services as a “teachers” guide for the walking tour with suggestions and information that the teacher can use at each site to have students “look for”, “find”, etc.



There is a lot of interest in community historic cemetery interpretation as part of community tours – if a cemetery is close by to the tour route. What market groups do you think would have the most interest in cemetery interpretation as part of their tour?

4. **Media Selection.** Once we have determined our resources to be interpreted (theme, route, etc.), our outcomes (objectives the tour is to accomplish), and the kinds of visitor groups that would be the most likely users of the walking tour, we need to think about the best media to be used for the walking tour itself. Some of the most common media to consider:

- Self-guiding booklet. This can be an effective media that would have an introduction to the tour, its theme and sites; have a good and easy to follow map with the route and directions easily to follow; and have good interpretation and graphics/photo(s) for each stop on the tour. The text would need to be kept short (not more than about two **50 or 60 -word paragraphs**), and use at least 12 to 14 point type so that it is easy to read. Production costs will depend on the number of pages needed, type of paper used, number of plates for photos, number of colors used, and number of copies needed for the initial print run. Note: **do not print photos on colored paper**, like light brown, light gray, etc. This will wash out the black and white photos. I recommend only printing photos on white paper for the best contrast. Get several different bids from different printers for production costs.
- Interpretive panels at each stop. This is more expensive (about \$1000 to \$2000 per panel) and you would still need a printed map with the route.
- Cassette tape tour. This would be the same tour as the printed brochure, but have narrators on tape doing each stop and giving directions to the next stop. You might or might not need a map to go with it, depending on the complexity of the tour route. Can make the tour more “affective” and emotional.
- A Video-Walkman – this would be a portable video player with a “live” guide that directs you to each stop, shows illustrations or historic photos of how the site “used to look”, can use various background music, etc. This allows for a full range of visual creativity, and the tourist can “buy” the tape as a souvenir

Some of the things to consider when making your selection of which media to select are:

- Will these be provided free, or for sale?
- If it is for sale, how do we do our accounting?
- What is our budget?
- How many visitors might want to do the tour?
- How will the materials be distributed or re-stocked and by who?
- How will visitors learn where to find the tour guides/materials?
- Who should they contact if they have any questions about the tour or the tour materials?
- What will the projected cost/contact and cost effectiveness of the tour be (what are we getting in return for our walking tour “investment”)?

### Using Interpretive Communication Principles with individual site interpretation.

As you begin to develop the specific interpretation for each historic site, natural history site, etc. to be interpreted along your walking tour route, make sure that the presentation for each stop is “interpretive”. Interpretive strategy is that each text copy or oral presentation needs to:

- **Provoke** the attention or curiosity of the reader or tour participant. Have provocative headlines for your copy, or ask provocative questions to get the visitor interested in the stop.
- **Relate** the concepts or information into terms that visitors can understand using analogies, or graphic examples. Remember that we are translating the story from the technical language of experts to the language of every day people.
- **Reveal** the main concept or point of the interpretation at the end of the interpretation – a surprise ending, like a Paul Harvey “Rest of the Story”.
- **Address the Whole** – make sure that this stops interpretive message links to the other stops, and illustrates the main interpretive theme.
- **Strive for Message Unity**. This means that use the right photographs, graphics, text fonts, background music or sound effects on tapes, etc. that support the story.

An example of an *interpretive text* for a historic building on a tour might look like:



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#### The Jackson Clubs dark secret.

In 1842, this was the location of the *Jackson Club*, a club, for **Men Only!** This was the place where the elite of Jackson came to do business, visit, and talk about the news of the times. And becoming a member was not easy – you had to be somebody important!

**Mike Sommerville was somebody!** Arriving in Jackson in 1843, he quickly developed a reputation as a powerful businessman, and was invited to become a member of the *Jackson Club*. Mike served two terms as club president, and even helped increase the membership of this Men’s Only organization. A proud member for 25 years, it wasn’t until Mike’s death in 1869 that it was discovered – that Mike was really ... Michelle – Yep! A Woman!

*(Directions to the next stop – use a different color or font to distinguish from text.)*

*Your next stop on the tour is just one block down this street on the right, a large white home, number 321. It looks like an ordinary home, but there’s an extraordinary story buried in the garden. I’ll meet you there with a shovel.*

You can see from this example that we might be illustrating a tour theme like: *The historic buildings of Jackson hold many amazing secrets*. The text has a **provocative header** – to get the readers attention, and the body of the copy creates the story (**relates**). The **reveal** is the surprise ending. Note that the copy also has to introduce the next stop (provoke) while also giving directions to “finding” the next stop. For this example I would also use a “logo” for each stop on the walking tour (the foot with a number) if this were in a booklet.

The presentation for this stop, if using a self-guiding booklet, could also have had a historic photo of the "Jackson Club", or may be even a photo of “Mike” to support and help illustrate the story. What do you think the “learning, behavioral and emotional” objectives of this stop were?

## 5. Implementation and Operations

This part of the walking tour plan is where you list and consider just how the walking tour will go from “idea” to reality. I always like to make a checklist of things that have to be done or considered. Here are a few of the things you might need to consider for the list – feel free to add to this list based on YOUR needs:

- What is the total budget for the project?
- What is the budget for the planning?
- Who will do the site/tour route planning and tour stop selections?
- Who will develop the copy for the tour stops?
- Who will put together the draft walking tour guide, including graphics or photo selections?
- Who will be responsible for “approving” the walking tour copy and graphic selections (and historical accuracy)?
- Will the tour be “pre-tested” to make sure it “works” using some mock-up tour brochures or draft cassette tapes, before any final production?
- Which media will be selected? For example, if a **self-guiding brochure** was selected as the best media:
  - Who will do the final photo-ready layouts?
  - Do we need permission to use the photos in the booklet?
  - Who will do the printing?
  - What budget has been allocated for photo-ready design?
  - Who will “approve” the final photo-ready design.
  - What paperweight and printing colors will be needed?
  - How many copies will be needed for the initial run?
  - What is the budget for printing?
  - Who will distribute the walking tour brochures?
  - How will the walking tour be advertised?

Make a checklist of all of the steps you will need to follow (and who is responsible for each step – particularly *approvals*). You should also add in time frames for completing each task, such as three weeks for planning, three weeks to complete the draft designs, and two weeks for printing.

## 6. Does it Work?

To me this is the most important part of the planning process, the evaluation of any draft materials to make sure that the objectives are accomplished. This can be easy or more complex depending on your time and budget. But always budget for the pre-testing of any walking tour. For example with a walking tour, have some visitors take the walking tour with a draft guide to critique or consider:

- Were the directions clear and easy to follow?
- Was the map clear and easy to follow?
- Could they find all of the stops?
- Did they understand the interpretation at each stop (objectives)?
- Was the tour “too long” or “just right” in length?
- Did they need a rest stop – a place to sit down?
- Was the tour interesting, provocative, boring?
- Would they recommend the tour to others?
- What did they enjoy the most – the least?
- Was the tour “right” for most market groups, only one market group?  
Who liked the tour the most from the mix of visitors who you had test it for you?

Remember “if you don’t have the time or budget to do it right the first time, when will you have the time and budget to do it over?”

## Summary

In this short paper I have given you some of the main points to consider when planning a community or historic district walking tour. This was a “generic” consideration, so feel free to add in any specific needs or considerations for your project. Walking tours can be a good heritage tourism addition for any community if well planned and promoted. I hope these ideas will help you to have a great tour and help celebrate and share your community’s history with others.

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