There is a formula that goes something like this: building construction date plus the name of the original owner or architect multiplied by several architectural terms equals a satisfactory entry for a historic district walking tour brochure. For example: "Architect F. J. Pope designed this Romanesque revival structure in 1894 and had his offices on the top floor. The unusual corner entrance is supported by stone columns with carved capitals in the Romanesque style."

Even a casual sampling of walking tours confirms a heavy dependence on facts and dates. The primary motivation of the typical historic district tour seems to revolve around the transfer of information: "This Queen Anne residence was built during the 1890s. The D. R. Jones family was the original owner and kept the house until 1985, when it was purchased by Gertrude Franks."
Like gingerbread on a Victorian, building descriptions are embellished with architectural terms: "Exhibiting the same elaboration of entry and windows as the Hunter house at 52 N. Washington, the Spencer house has an ogee-arch at the front gable, and a barrel-vaulted front porch supported by paired Italianate posts."

Who is the intended audience for entries written like this? Will they capture and hold the attention of the general public, an eighth grade student, or even most residents who live or shop in a historic district? Will most of those who admire the Spencer house know an ogee-arch when they see it? Will they remember the term a week after they have read it? Will they find it relevant assuming they even think about it?

If the sponsors of a historic district walking tour assume and are satisfied with a very narrow definition of audience, perhaps a factual, architecturally-based approach makes sense. If, however, one of the goals is to make historic structures interesting and relevant to a broader audience, these types of tours risk failure. Assuming that a walking tour will both entertain and promote preservation, both sponsors and authors need to consider taking their tours down a different path. If they seek protection, they need to understand that concern for historic structures often begins with appreciation. Simply put, sponsors need to take a detour. They need to follow the path that leads to interpretation, not information.

This interpretive alternative is hardly an uncharted thoroughfare. In fact, others have not only passed this way before, they have left detailed directions. Guides who showed visitors through the interiors of historic structures faced a similar fork in their own road decades ago. They pioneered thematic tours steeped in social history. Similarly, scriptwriters for audio visual programs learned how to bring their stories to life with accessible, descriptive language. In both cases, the secret to increased relevance and more attentive audiences lay in the application of now time-tested interpretive techniques. (See, for example, The Interpreter’s Guidebook by Kathleen Regnier, Michael Gross, and Ron Zimmerman, Interpreting for Park Visitors by William J. Lewis, and Interpretation of Historic Sites by William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low.)

Consider the following advice:

1. First of all, think about the meaning behind the facts. Freeman Tilden in his classic book, Interpreting Our Heritage, placed this principle at the foundation of effective interpretation. Make connections and discuss relationships, he said. To see how this idea works, compare two entries from a historic walking tour: “The cream brick Greek Revival facade was remodeled about 1892 with two metal-clad bays, and changes were made to the roof line.” And, “Red brick was rarely used for building during the early days because it had to be imported and was therefore much more expensive than the brick made of local clays, which when fired, produced a cream colored brick.” (Old Main Street Historic District, Racine, Wisconsin). The first entry gives information, the second equates cream brick with local manufacturers and cost. It allows those taking the tour to realize why there are so many buildings in Racine made with cream not red brick. And, when they see a red brick structure, they now know that it cost big bucks.

2. Find ways to make the tour relevant. Establish links with the likely experience of the individual taking the tour. By writing that, “No American downtown was ever complete without a five and ten cent store,” the Racine tour reminds many of childhood, of the days when they bought candy from the counter in the local five-and-dime.

3. Include social history. Use your tour to illustrate how times have changed. How does it make you feel when you walk down a street knowing that “any respectable Victorian lady refused to be seen on this block where gentlemen frequented saloons and billiard halls”? Next time you drink a cup of coffee think about the fact that “even the famous Maxwell House Hotel, whose coffee Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed ‘good to the last drop,’ had a side door entrance for women.” Write about history that may no longer be evident: “In the 1960s, this street was the center of Nashville’s civil rights movement.” (All from Nashville’s CityWalk). Or, “Blast furnaces introduced industry to rural America.” (From Discovering Pennsylvania’s Allegheny Heritage). Explain cause and effect, “industrial development led to neighborhood development.” (South Side Walking Tour, Seneca Falls, New York). Or, “Williamsville owes its existence to the falls of Ellicott Creek.” (Buffalo Tours, Buffalo, New York). Explain how historic structures contributed to a community’s social fabric or to the quality of an individual’s lifestyle. “Rural churches were community centers, the sites of baptisms, communions, marriages and funerals. Churches also reinforced acceptable social behavior.” Or, “A secure weatherproof barn was crucial to a farmer’s livelihood.” (From The Farmers’
**Museum** in Cooperstown, New York).

Remember that interpretation is never devoid of facts. Facts are, as Tilden says, the raw material of interpretation. An entry discussing a church in Seneca Falls, New York, includes the date the sanctuary was constructed and enlarged, but the reader also learns that Irish-Catholic immigrants built the church with a donation from a rich industrialist who “believed a church would help stabilize the growing immigrant community.” (*South Side Walking Tour*, Seneca Falls, New York). Interpretation explains motivations and describes emotions. It places the facts in context.

4. **Draw analogies** that increase understanding or that help the audience see a subject from a new perspective. “Carpenters’ Hall served as an excellent advertisement for members of the Carpenters’ Company. This well-built headquarters demonstrated the quality craftsmanship that could be expected when a company member agreed to construct a building.” (*Independence National Historical Park: The Story Behind the Scenery*).

5. **Encourage self-discovery.** Help your audience to really see. “As you look at this large brick house, find three things that you think show that the owner was wealthy.” (*Bishop White House*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). Encourage imagination. “The year is 1850 and a large crowd is gathered on the grounds of Market Hall, where politicians often delivered public speeches. The crowd’s attention is focused on the triangular-shaped Courier Building. From a second floor wrought-iron balcony on the Montgomery Street side of the building, the famous Daniel Webster
speaks." (Historic Clinton & Hanover Squares, Syracuse, New York).

6. **Use language that brings the scene to life.** Be descriptive. Use each of the senses. “The smell of fresh cut alfalfa from the field to your left fills the air in July as provisions for the wintering animals are put up. The thundering hooves of up to two hundred horses and mules can still be heard as wranglers move the animals between the ten pastures on the 5,000-acre ranch. The concrete slab to your left is all that remains of a garage and bunkhouse that burned down in 1982. (Remember, no smoking on the tour.)” (Ninemile Remount Depot & Ranger Station, Lolo National Forest, Montana). Notice how much factual material is communicated, but passed along painlessly. Use words to trigger familiar noises in the visitor’s head. “At the time of the Chinese New Year, the festivities spilled out into Granite Street with firecrackers and music played on gongs, drums, cymbals, and flute.” (Granite Creek Walking Tour, Prescott, Arizona).

Or, “The two-toned ‘beeeeeee-ohh’! of the compressed-air fog siren once made horses skittish five miles away and caused guests at Slater’s Hotel to ask what wild animal made such a noise.” (Split Rock Lighthouse, Minnesota).

7. **Personalize the tour.** Discuss the human implications of events. Write that “Theodore Roosevelt equated Sagamore Hill with contentment” and then proceed to point out the things that the president enjoyed about family life. (From *National Parks and the New York Experience*). Tell stories that visitors will enjoy and remember. Use quotes that breathe life into inanimate structures. “Because of the warm climate the houses are built with a sort of corridor called a hall. In this the residents live when the cold season is over, because the doors at the two ends admit a flow of air which helps one to breathe during sometimes suffocating heat, especially on a day when the atmosphere is filled with lightning, and claps of thunder succeed one another with dreadful reverberations.” (Moreau de St. Méry’s *American Journey*, referring to Norfolk, Virginia.) Compare the vastly different moods triggered by the following two quotations: “I enjoy here everything that a reasonable mind can desire.” (Benjamin Franklin, content in the home where he spent the last years of his life.) And, “My life had its beginnings in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings.” (Booker T. Washington about his birthplace, a small rural Virginia plantation.)

8. **Have a theme.** Historic house tours have undergone a radical transformation because they no longer just catalog facts about furniture. Instead, experienced interpreters find the threads that stitch the pieces of a house’s history together. By following those threads they weave memories that linger long after the dates fade from visitors’ minds. You can do the same with a historic district. A tour of Middlebury, Vermont, is organized around the prevalence of marble—marble quarries, marble-related businesses, marble sidewalks, marble statues, and marble columns. A tour in Buffalo, New York, states its theme up front—it “will put the lie to the myth that public agencies can’t sponsor good-looking buildings.” (See the case study of Seneca Falls, New York, for a more complete discussion of the effective application of themes.)

A thematic approach allows you to focus and reinforce your message. Still, you can tap into the richness of your district by offering different tours at different times of year. A spring tour might take visitors to colorful gardens while a summer tour could highlight hometown, bandstand, and flag-waving patriotism. In each case, from the beginning, the audience has a center of focus, a story that they can follow and recall. When you use a theme, entries usually flow one into another and your audience keeps walking and reading.

9. **Follow the creative process often used for audio visual programs:** write the script first, and then add the illustrations. Begin your research, locate possible stops, search for themes, then dig deeper for the details that will bring the story to life. Prepare well-written interpretive text that can stand alone. Then “illustrate” it with the historic structures. Tours that follow this advice encourage additional uses for the walking tour. They are often read at home in a recliner. “Both day and night, the Fire Island Lighthouse has a distinctive visual signature. Boat captains learn to recognize the two broad black and two white stripes painted on the lighthouse. But even in the dark, they know that the light from Fire island snaps through the night every 7.5 seconds.” (*National Parks and the New York Experience*). Of course each entry must refer to what the reader might see on-site, but when well done, it interests even the reader who is far away. Try to
send your message to this much broader audience.


11. Finally, take another look at format. Never assume that your walking tour must be a publication, or only a publication. Certainly brochures are flexible. They can be designed in many different sizes and shapes, one color or brightly illustrated. They can be attractive souvenirs. They might be given away free of charge or sold to generate income. But what about other media? (See the case study of Jamestown, Virginia, for more on media alternatives.) Have you considered an audio cassette or CD? With an audio program the world of sound, music, and narration opens up to you. Should the tour be supplemented with signs? The CityWalk in Nashville, Tennessee marks each stop on their walking tour with human silhouettes that symbolize the topic discussed. For example, a saxophone player marks the center of the city’s nightlife. For special occasions or special events, what about adding the human touch? Actors in period clothing are increasingly used to supplement walking tours. They allow visitors to meet, at least for a moment of transposed time, a building’s architect, a housekeeper, or a gardener.

Remember there are significant reasons for applying these interpretive techniques to walking tours:

- They provide an enhanced experience that can be enjoyed by an expanded audience.
- They build new support for preservation, based on deeper understanding and appreciation of historic structures.
- They send the preservation message via different media that might reach different ears.
- They can demonstrate the economic benefits of historic preservation, a goal your local business community will surely appreciate. If you succeed in convincing tourists to walk your district, why not point out where they can eat, shop, relax, etc.? Tie the historic to the commercially interesting. (See the case study of the CityWalk in Nashville, Tennessee.)

As you plan your walking tour, make a conscious decision to explore beyond the well-trodden but primarily informational route taken by so many in the past. Look for ways to use proven interpretive techniques to enliven your presentation. Create a journey that will survive fondly in the minds of both loyal and entirely new audiences.

**Walking Tours with a Theme: The Case of Seneca Falls, New York**

Seneca Falls, in upstate New York, depends upon partnerships to interpret the history of the town, the 1848 Women’s Rights Convention, and the women’s rights movement. Interpretive tasks are divided among Women’s Rights National Historical Park (a unit of the National Park Service), the Seneca Falls Urban Cultural Park (one of fourteen such parks in the State of New York), the National Women’s Hall of Fame, and several county and city governments, museums, and organizations. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Heritage Areas System provided funding for a series of three notable walking tour brochures, written by Margaret McFadden.

These brochures stand out because they successfully adapt thematic interpretation to historic districts. Each
tour covers a slightly different geographic area and presents the town's structural heritage from different points of view. One tour, for example, focuses on industrialization and the impact that industrial and technological change had on Seneca Falls and its citizens.

"The process of industrialization," the tour text points out, "caused great upheaval and confusion by changing virtually every aspect of life." New jobs, new working conditions, new homes, new neighbors, and new social and family structure, all accompanied the growth of industries along the Cayuga-Seneca Canal that ran through Seneca Falls. Stops on the tour include several factories and shops, a church, and the homes of mill owners and workers.

The unrest that accompanied industrial change provides the theme for a second tour. "The Seneca Falls convention happened when it did because of the coming together of visionary leaders with an atmosphere open to social change." This tour, then, focuses on the reform movements that touched the lives of Seneca Falls residents. Stops interpret industrial unrest (related to working conditions), religious agitation (related to abolition and women's rights), the transportation and accompanying communication revolution (railroads made the world a smaller place), Jacksonian democracy (expansion of the franchise for white men, in contrast to the continued enslavement of African-Americans), legal reforms (again including the rights of women), even changes in fashion (changes in women's clothing now associated with resident Amelia Bloomer).

The third Seneca Falls tour focuses on architecture. It makes the point that "architectural styles reflect the tastes, values, and concerns of people in a given time, expressed in three-dimensional form." Colonial Revival, for example, can be tied to "new interest in America's past caused by the nation's centennial in 1876," Italianate architecture, on the other hand, was "inspired by the poets and painters of the Romantic movement, who looked to the European past for inspiration in the face of rapid changes transforming the nation." Queen Anne homes display an eclectic mix of design elements popular with architects hired by America's newly rich. Text at other tour stops similarly discusses Dutch Revival, Tudor Revival, Gothic Revival, Federal, Second Empire, and Greek Revival buildings. Wherever necessary, the reader learns about construction dates and building occupants. In most cases, however, the tour concentrates on how each structure fits into the broadest historical context, gives a few pointers on how to identify different styles, and interprets the social ramifications of each shift in architectural taste.

Broadcasting on Multiple Channels: The Case of Jamestown, Virginia

When compared to most historic districts, Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in America, is largely invisible now. Most of the structures are gone, except for below ground features discovered by archeologists. From afar, a visitor might wonder what there is to see. But not for long. Soon after they arrive, visitors are engaged in the colony's fascinating stories. How does this happen? What lessons can be learned from how Jamestown faces this challenge of vanished history?

Success depends upon the excellent use of a variety of interpretive media. Jamestown sends its interpretive message over several channels, not just one. It broadcasts to those who listen better than they read, those who are attracted by a touch of drama, those who can become lost in fantasies triggered by the Elizabethan accent of an actor, or those who love to look at each detail of a painting. Jamestown shuns dependence on the traditional walking tour brochure. Instead, visitors find:

- Paintings by contemporary artist Sidney King, now used on exterior "wayside" exhibits. King's paintings not only help visitors imagine what Jamestown's structures looked like, they bring the streets of Jamestown to life once again. Residents gossip over fences, debate the political issues of the day, or hoe weeds from their gardens. Chickens scratch the ground and dogs pant in the Virginia heat.
- During the summer, visitors strolling along The Back Streete might encounter an actor in period clothing who slips into a first person presentation. As visitors listen, even this long ago decayed village seems more tangible. Imagine how well this technique might work among structures that still exist.
- Other visitors rent a tape recorder in the park's visitor center and listen to an audio tour as they walk through the town. Tapes like these introduce visitors to the sounds of the past, the noises of everyday life, the cadence of English as it was spoken hundreds of years ago.
- Exhibits and an orientation film in the Jamestown visitor center and, of course, programs presented by interpreters round out the interpretive media brought to bear on the history of Jamestown. Viewed in its entirety, Jamestown's interpretive program serves as a valuable catalogue of options.

As a case study, Jamestown has obvious application to districts that include significant landscapes, battlefields, and sites rather than only structures. But the interpretive tools used there are also easily adapted to even the most structurally intact urban historic district.
Nashville's CityWalk was developed with a variety of audiences in mind, including adults and children.

Silhouettes of historical characters mark key stops of the CityWalk tour.
User-Friendly History: The Case of Nashville’s CityWalk

Stops along Nashville’s CityWalk are located along a green “time line” painted on the sidewalk. At each location, the traditional historical sign gives basic information about the site. But the creators of CityWalk aspired, from the beginning, to transcend the usual. They never intended to offer only facts, dates, and information. From the outset, they adopted a “user-friendly” approach to touring downtown Nashville.

They knew, for example, that their audience would include children and adults so they designed tour stops that would engage both groups. At each of tour’s fifteen locations, the Metropolitan Historical Commission, working with Paine/Pomeroy, Inc., a marketing and communication firm, imagined appropriate historical characters and constructed them in silhouette. These figures became icons for the history of each site—a jazz musician coaxes melancholy from his saxophone, a World War I doughboy returns to his Nashville sweetheart, a Civil War soldier trudges resolutely toward battle, a preacher exhorts the wayward to repent. Via these symbolic human images, it’s easy to relate to and remember the historical essence of each stop.

The path of the tour itself deserves special mention. As is the case with all such walking tours, careful thought went into the selection of the historic sites. But in the case of CityWalk, planners also chose streets that took visitors past many of the amenities of downtown Nashville—restaurants, hotels, and shops as well as the convention center and Capitol. The tour route not only introduces visitors to history, it accommodates the basic needs of all tourists. Merchants, of course, are enthusiastic. “It’s been good for everyone,” says one shopkeeper along the tour’s green line. CityWalk is not only good interpretation, it appears that it is good public relations and good economics. “Don’t miss Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge,” the brochure suggests, “across the alley from the Ryman Auditorium (home of the Grand Old Opry), where Opry stars relaxed for a beer and a chat with Tootsie between shows.”

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