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American Cultural Icons in Museums

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
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Abstract

Though much attention has been paid recently to cultural studies, very little has been written on the subject of cultural icons. This is unfortunate because cultural icons are a significant part of American life. They are everywhere, from product labels and television to museums and public parks. They represent ideals that have been adopted by the American public, ideals that often change over time. Museums frequently participate in the making, display, collection, and study of cultural icons; therefore, museum professionals must recognize what cultural icons are and how they are employed. This paper illustrates some of the ways in which cultural icons have evolved over time and how this information can be used to improve their interpretation in museums. What are the histories of some of these cultural icons? What can be gained by putting these complicated histories on display? This paper explores these questions through specific examples: The Gettysburg Battlefield, Willie B at Zoo Atlanta, Ellis Island, and the ruby slippers at the National Museum of American History. By examining cultural icons and their place in the museum world, this paper deals with the larger issue of how cultural icons should be treated by museums, historic sites, and even zoos.

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Introduction

When I was growing up in Georgia, I once visited the gorilla Willie B at Zoo Atlanta with my elementary school class. Zoo Atlanta had just completed work on a new multimillion dollar gorilla habitat, which I can now surmise was the motivating factor behind our teachers' willingness to navigate a bus full of noisy children through the pre-Olympics traffic nightmare that was Atlanta in the 1980s. Just like many other children on field trips, we were more excited about being out of school than we were about learning. We saw Willie B and numerous other animals at the zoo that day, yet we had no sense that what we were seeing was anything special. In fact, I barely remember the visit at all. When I returned home and my mother asked me how the field trip went, I said something like, "It was okay." Though my mother tolerated my lack of interest, she explained to me the significance of what I had seen. "When I was a little girl," she said, "the animals were kept in cages. They didn't have habitats outside like the ones you saw today."

I was stunned. It was impossible for me to imagine a big silverback gorilla like Willie B living in a cage. It sounded like slavery to me, an association that was especially powerful for a child living in a state still encumbered by its history of slavery and racial inequality. At that moment, I developed a deep compassion for Willie B. His story became part of my understanding of the struggle for the American dream. I likened Willie B's ordeal to my parents' own struggle to achieve middle-class American goals: house, car, pension. In 1989, after 28 years of living alone in a one-room cell, Willie B finally had a home. (fig. 8) He had achieved the American dream.[1]

Without hearing my mother's story, I may never have realized the significance of Willie B and the new gorilla habitat, nor any of the other habitats that have since been built in zoos around

[1] Elizabeth Hanson, *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1-2.

the country. As at many museums, Zoo Atlanta's back story was not on display--and for an understandable reason. The zoo had become notorious in the late 1970s into the 80s as one of the worst zoos in the country. While other zoos had been moving toward better conservation and more humane treatment of animals, Zoo Atlanta had remained stagnant. The opening of the new gorilla habitat marked a significant change taking place in America and elevated Willie B to the status of cultural icon. His name became synonymous in Georgia with both animal rights and American achievement. I can only imagine the value of my educational experience at the zoo had I realized that during my visit as a child.

The history of cultural icons like Willie B is just as important to our understanding of the past as the subjects that museums seek to interpret. This topic is closely connected to the study of social memory, or the way that communities remember and commemorate past events. Over the past decade, social memory has evolved as a unique area of interest within history and cultural studies. Its increasing popularity as a new discipline indicates a fascination not only with history, but with the ways that historic events are remembered. Museum staff should continue this movement by looking both at the past and how the past is recollected. In particular, museums should consider how cultural icons have evolved as a result of the public's desire to remember the past and use this information in their exhibitions.

American museums have been demonstrating increased interest in preserving institutional history in recent years as part of their obligation to the public. The burden of preserving such history falls not only on directors of museums or historic sites, but also on curators, educators, and registrars. Museum professionals, particularly those involved in museum registration, have been saving institutional history primarily by archiving documents and photographs that relate to the museum's past. Institutional history, however, is largely preserved in a linear manner. In other words, museums seem to be mostly concerned with what happened and in what order. Yet

understanding a museum's past and its role in the present also requires a detailed analysis of the museum's interpretive history. Understanding how the museum or site has interpreted the past over the years can lead to an even greater, broader knowledge of the messages it seeks to communicate today. Comprehending how the institution's message has evolved is especially important when it comes to cultural icons in the museum world. Within this environment, cultural icons achieve a significance beyond that of other icons by tapping into cultural values with which a large portion of the population identifies. As museums and historic sites use cultural icons to help interpret the past, they also help create it even as the meanings and roles of cultural icons change in American society. This process of creating history has been a key issue at sites like Colonial Williamsburg, which has been struggling to interpret colonial history over past decades in the face of changing cultural attitudes.[2]

The sites and objects that become cultural icons in America, such as Ellis Island or the ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*, have multilayered meanings, yet they are normally presented in museums with a single layer of interpretation. A label identifying the ruby slippers at the National Museum of American History, for instance, stated that the shoes were worn by Judy Garland during dancing scenes in *The Wizard of Oz*. This information does not even begin to reveal the complicated history surrounding the slippers, nor does it explain any of the factors that have contributed to the slippers having become a cultural icon. As we will see, the interpretation of cultural icons like the ruby slippers requires more in-depth thought than the interpretation of other museum objects or historic sites. It is not enough to simply display cultural icons with the kind of basic historical information often found in museums.

This paper will illustrate some of the ways that cultural icons have evolved over time and how this information can be used to improve their interpretation. Though much attention has been paid recently to cultural studies, very little has been written on the subject of cultural icons.

[2] Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

This is unfortunate because, as this paper will show, cultural icons are a significant part of American life. They are everywhere, from product labels and television to museums and public parks. They represent ideals that have been adopted by the American public, ideals that often change over time. In museums, the exhibition of cultural icons has typically been based on celebratory themes which fail to fully take into account the histories and meanings of icons. By examining cultural icons and their place in the museum world, this paper will deal with the larger issue of how cultural icons should be treated by museums, historic sites, and even zoos. Beforehand, however, it is necessary to start at the beginning by outlining what constitutes an icon. We will also thoroughly examine what cultural icons are and how they are made. Finally, we will look at specific examples of cultural icons and consider how these icons were created, how they are currently exhibited, and how their histories and meanings can be used by institutions to improve their interpretation.

Chapter I

Understanding Icons

Museums often participate in the making, display, collection, and study of cultural icons; therefore, museum professionals must recognize what cultural icons are and how they are employed. In order to understand what constitutes a cultural icon, one must first understand what icons are and what they are used for. In the broadest sense, icons are symbols that serve as placeholders for information or ideas. They are often people or things that embody the basic characteristics or ideals of an era or group of people.[3] In art history, icons are frequently thought of as religious symbols, most often found in paintings, but also used in religious sculpture and architecture. In religious settings, icons often represent a spiritual body or guide, such as a saint or martyr. These conventional icons communicate rather specific messages to large audiences via visual representations; however, an icon need not be an image. It can also be an object, a place, a building, or even a person. Today, the word "icon" commonly refers to computer symbols that represent an action. These computer symbols denote documents one might wish to open, programs one might wish to run, or other commands. Icons are as old as writing and in fact constitute the earliest forms of communication. An example is ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, which is constructed using a series of symbols rather than letters and words. Icons are "the most enduring element in any writing system, be it phonetic or ideographic. The icon has great advantages over language-based systems in that it is, within certain limits, universally understood."[4] Formulating and recording ideas via symbols dates at least to the Stone Age and the practice has continued to the present.[5] The custom of allowing icons to represent characteristics or ideals is dynamic and ongoing.

[3] Albert Gaur and Rosemary Sassoon, *Signs, Symbols, and Icons: Pre-History to the Computer Age* (Exeter: Intellect, 1997). Gaur and Sassoon provide a basic history of icons and their uses through time, focusing heavily on icons as a form of written communication.

[4] Ibid., 11.

[5] Ibid., 12.

Iconographic symbols appear “at a particular point of social and economic development, marking a particular phase, serving a particular purpose.” These symbols “store and communicate information” for and to a public audience.[6] Many types of icons have been created over the centuries for the purpose of communicating ideas relevant at individual points of development. Understanding these various types of icons helps one frame the exploration of cultural icons, some of which are reflective of earlier iconographic forms.

A common form of icon is that employed to aid memory. Tallies, for example, have been used for thousands of years to aid memory by marking, usually in a series of lines, important amounts, such as debt owed or the number of enemies killed. They were also utilized to assist in the remembrance of certain events, such as an animal hunt or a naturally occurring event, like rain or an eclipse.[7] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, today considered a cultural icon, is an excellent contemporary example of a tally. The list of names on the Memorial seems to mark not only the number of US soldiers killed in the Vietnam War, but also debts paid to the United States by ordinary citizens. These names are etched into a wall, just as notches may have been inscribed in wood or stone in ancient times.

Another type of icon is the property mark, which is a symbol used to establish ownership. A good example is a national flag, which is considered a cultural icon.[8] Property icons, or logos, are also created by museums for marketing purposes. Other property marks in the museum world include the image of T-Rex at the American Museum of Natural History. Used in a manner similar to a mascot, T-Rex’s image adorns various pages of the museum’s website as well as numerous items available in the gift shop. Like a mascot, T-Rex is recognizable by most museum visitors and serves as a symbol of the AMNH.

The word “icon” can also refer to a symbol from popular culture. Certain celebrities are

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[6] Gaur, 15.
[7] Ibid., 19.
[8] Ibid., 22-23.

referred to, both in life and death, as icons. Elvis Presley, for example, is considered an icon of rock and roll culture and a sex symbol. His Graceland Mansion, located in Memphis, is a symbol that refers simultaneously to Hollywood glamour and the ease of Southern living. In addition to being a former First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy was a celebrity who has been heralded as an icon of fashion. The Statue of Liberty is an icon considered by many to be the quintessential symbol of freedom, perhaps the best-known characteristic of American life. The Stonewall Inn of New York is an icon of the gay rights movement. The Model-T can be considered an icon of American invention and progress. From looking at this list, it is clear that icons can range from singular objects to people and even entire places.

Museum buildings sometimes become icons as well. Museums have often been built following a temple-like design using iconic architectural forms that highlight the importance of the building and the objects contained within. At times, these forms have been thought to convey cultural ideals. Museum buildings are frequently built by famous architects of the era. These buildings are constructed to house icons and, sometimes, they become icons themselves. The Guggenheim in New York City by Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, is an icon of museum architecture and is more widely recognizable by the public than any object in the museum's collection. Museum buildings are often constructed on or near a park or themselves have created open public spaces, such as sculpture gardens. This emphasizes the museum's role as a public forum and icon of the community.[9] The act of sharing objects with the public has long been considered philanthropic and contributes to the perception that icons are created and displayed for the good of the people.

Iconic objects not only represent characteristics or ideals of an era or group, but they can also be used to inspire such characteristics in others.[10] American icons like the Star-Spangled

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[9] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York, Routledge, 2000), 10.

[10] Angela Jane Weisl, *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 80.

Banner often inspire feelings of patriotism, for instance, just as a cross might inspire faith in God. The idea that a symbol could inspire certain types of behavior was the driving force behind religious icons. For example, an icon depicting Saint Francis can inspire compassion for animals and environmental awareness. Icons from popular culture also influence behavior. Posters of celebrities and cartoon characters, for instance, adorn the bedrooms of youth all over America and are used partly as inspiration for children's behavior. In *Signs, Symbols, and Icons*, Gaur and Sassoon even compare the icon to the Zen "koan," which is something that holds the power to lead directly to enlightenment, although the focus in most museums is more on measurable educational goals than the immeasurable idea of enlightenment.[11] This desire to outline educational objectives in museums adds to the importance of reinterpreting cultural icons in order to improve educational materials in museums.

A wide variety of museum objects have become icons. When determining the range of objects that have become icons of American history and culture, one need only review the list of fifteen most popular objects at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Listed among them are Richard Petty's stock car, a Kermit the Frog puppet, George Washington's uniform, Muhammad Ali's gloves and robe, a top hat allegedly worn by Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater, Judy Garland's ruby slippers, and a lunch counter from a Woolworth's department store where a civil rights sit-in took place.[12] These objects represent various aspects of life in America and many of them are connected to a famous individual or event. Several such iconic objects could also be considered relics, meaning the bulk of their value lies in their connection to a particular person. One can even extend this definition of relics to include objects connected to a particular place or event. Primarily, however, these objects tie the visitor to the ideals or characteristics of other people from the past. The communication of these ideals or

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[11] Gaur, 12.

[12] Steven D. Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick, *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* [online exhibition] (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001, accessed 1 April 2006); available from http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu; Internet.

characteristics through objects contributes to the health of the community or nation by providing a tangible means of common experience. Icons are "intimately connected with the storage and communication of information essential to the physical and spiritual well-being of a community. . . . The icon acts as a catalyst for new developments while at the same time binding the past to the present."[13]

American works of art can also become cultural icons; however, art icons may appear less prominent in America than in other countries. This could be perceived as a sign that Americans do not value art as much as history, perhaps because art continues to be a field that remains somewhat foreign to the average person. Because we are all makers of history, it seems to be more accessible to everyone, whereas art can appear to be a pursuit only for those educated in that field. The value placed on history over art in America is apparent when one reviews the curriculum at many public schools. Schools often require multiple courses in history, while art is generally relegated to the "elective" category, along with music and other subjects perceived to be less important than those in the core curriculum. While this paper focuses on cultural icons in history museums and historic sites, it is important to acknowledge that it is possible for works of art to become cultural icons.

Perhaps the best example of a cultural icon in American art is Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, the famous painting depicting a farmer holding a pitchfork and his daughter in front of a Gothic-inspired white house. (fig. 1) Wood's painting was initially a controversial piece, "especially among Midwesterners who felt themselves the object of satire . . . but other viewers then and since have found in the stoic representation the epitome of staunch American character."[14] The painting has been parodied numerous times through various media. Wood's image has been used on various commercial products, such as *Newman's Own* food labels, *Mad* magazine, the recent TV series *The Simple Life*, and it was even the subject of an episode of

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[13] Gaur, 12.

[14] Jane C. Milosch, *Grant Wood's Studio* (Cedar Rapids, Munich, New York: Prestel, 2005), 24.

National Public Radio's series *Present at the Creation*, which explores American icons. Photographer and author Gordon Parks referenced Wood's painting in his 1942 image *U.S. Government Charwoman* (also titled *Ella Watson*), which was a direct response to the discrimination Parks encountered while working in Washington, D.C. (fig. 2) The references to *American Gothic* over the years are too numerous to list, which indicates that the painting is recognizable to many people as representative of American culture.

According to Douglas Holt in *How Brands Become Icons*, "Icons serve as society's foundational compass points--anchors of meaning continually referenced in entertainment, journalism, politics, and advertising."[15] Icons so forcefully invoke feelings or memories that they come to represent events or ideals and thereby take on new meanings, sometimes abandoning their original purposes. These meanings can change depending on current public attitudes and viewers' needs. Icons take on new meanings in multiple ways. Sometimes icons are tied to their new meanings by groups of people that venerate them for their attachment to a person, ideal, or event. In other instances, meaning is attached to an object by a museum, historic site, or government. Museums and historic sites create icons to some extent every time they use an object or place to tell a story. The object or place serves as a visual representation of a larger issue or event. Most museum objects are, all of a sudden, removed from their original purposes and expected to represent other things. It is often the visual clue or sign that points to the past.

Objects and sites become iconic for a variety of reasons. American museums recognized the value of iconographic objects early on and began collecting them so that they might serve to aid the memory of events and ideals and communicate them to the public. At the Smithsonian Institution, for instance, relics of George Washington were collected and put on display soon after the creation of the museum in 1846. Because the relics of this iconic American figure were recognized as icons themselves, the Smithsonian decided it was important to preserve and

[15] Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2004), 1.

display them for present and future citizens. Since then, museums and historic sites all across the country have continued the practice of preserving and displaying icons of varying significance. In some cases, a site or object is elevated to iconic status by a group of people prior to being acquired by the museum. In other cases, the museum acquires the object, which later becomes an icon either through the spontaneous devotion of the public, through promotion by the museum, or sometimes both. In some instances, a museum is created around an icon or group of icons. Still in other cases, the mere act of acquiring an object pushes it into iconic status. In any of these scenarios, the museum plays an integral part in the creation, display, and marketing of iconic objects.

Cultural icons are different from other types of icons because, rather than simply representing something else, they relate to underlying ideals or the moral-structure of a large group of people in a deeply meaningful way. These icons can represent an entire cultural movement. Places or objects become cultural icons via cultural branding. According to Holt in *How Brands Become Icons*, "the lessons of cultural branding [can be applied] to any market offering that people regularly use, or else idealize."[16] This indicates that museums may be able to better understand their own cultural histories and identities by looking at the way cultural icons are created and used in marketing. We will soon see that the adaptation of cultural icons to changing ideals is similar among both commercial products, such as Coca-Cola, and museum objects like Willie B.

When museums or historic sites are created, they usually set out to educate the public about a particular subject or subjects typically outlined in their missions. Museums collect and interpret objects or interpret their sites in order to represent chosen topics. Many museums and their objects are icons to some degree in that they serve as references to other information or ideas. Nevertheless, certain museums, objects, or historic sites become cultural icons, meaning

[16] Holt, 5.

they become accepted by groups of people as good or authentic representations of cultural ideals.

Cultural branding of an icon taps into identity values that are shared by a large portion of a population. These shared identity values evolve because "people are constructing their identities in response to the same historical changes that influence the entire nation."[17] Museums can link to these identity values through their interpretation of cultural icons and use these values to reinforce the educational experiences of visitors. A cultural icon is multilayered in meaning; therefore, the interpretation of the cultural icon must be multilayered in order to attract a variety of people within a community and appeal to their identity values.

Calling a person, place, or thing a cultural icon implies a certain level of popularity. As Holt says, "The crux of iconicity is that the person or the thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important."[18] "Widely regarded" is the key phrase here. An object is not usually considered a cultural icon simply because it has meaning for an individual. For instance, a piece of costume jewelry worn by someone's grandmother is not in and of itself a cultural icon simply because it reminds the individual of her grandmother. If that someone's grandmother happened to be Coco Chanel, however, the jewelry might then be considered culturally iconic because Coco Chanel both instigated and embodied an archetypal shift in attitudes about women's fashion. Costume jewelry was a key part of that shift, so a Chanel bracelet, for example, could possibly be allowed to serve as an icon of fashion. In museums, cultural icons are objects or sites that communities accept as representative of certain ideals. Visitors often actively seek out these cultural icons in order to create or renew a connection with other people or another time, just as an individual might use her grandmother's bracelet as a means of connecting with her ancestors.

Museums and historic sites are interested in helping visitors make connections to a subject. People who accept a museum, museum objects, or a historic site as representative of a

[17] Holt, 6.
[18] Ibid., 1.

subject and its associated ideals usually do so because the museum reinforces or builds upon experiences or knowledge they already possessed. These people, in turn, often discuss their visit with others. Visitor experiences are also confirmed through various media. Potential visitors may already have experience or knowledge that ties them to the museum, but even if they do not, the act of discussing the museum with those who have already visited or learning about it through media often gives them the necessary knowledge to make a connection with that place. Once a museum or object becomes popular enough, that is, it becomes accepted by a community as representative of cultural ideals, and it remains popular for a long period of time, it may begin to be considered a cultural icon. The iconic status of the museum or object is maintained as the word-of-mouth process continues. There is usually not one moment in which an object or site becomes an icon. Rather, the transition from site or object to cultural icon happens gradually.

People travel to see icons for a variety of reasons. Icons have the ability to attract visitors who do not necessarily understand exactly why they are going to see them. They simply know that visiting the icon is something they are supposed to do as educated American citizens. Other visitors travel to see icons with a specific purpose in mind. Many visitors seek spiritual or emotional experiences in museums or at historic sites. The object or experience that allows one to have that type of spiritual response varies depending upon the visitor. Nonetheless, the main goal of most visitors to a museum or historic site is often to experience a connection to another time, event, person, or place. Each year on the anniversary of Elvis Presley's death in August, thousands of people descend upon Graceland Mansion in Memphis to get a glimpse of Elvis's grave. They wander through the mansion and view articles that once belonged to Elvis in hopes that they will feel a palpable connection with the King of Rock and Roll. Some have sworn afterwards that they actually felt the presence of Elvis's spirit among them. Icons are powerful representations and must be treated with the appropriate amount of respect by museums for the

benefit of visitors.

Icons do not mean the same thing for every individual. An exhibition at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, for example, attempted to turn rock stars' clothing into icons of the musical stars themselves. One critic found the goal achieved, but another called the show a "Hillfiger ad."[19] The critics' comments demonstrate that one visitor's icon of the alternative rock movement is another visitor's ordinary, grungy flannel shirt. Similarly, icons can have little national relevance while still remaining significant to a particular community. Certain kinds of icons, however, tend to be icons for larger groups of people. Part of what determines the widespread recognition of icons is a process Douglas Holt calls "cultural branding." Iconic museums or objects succeed in causing visitors to have "moments of recognition"[20] that allow people to pinpoint and define ideals or previous experiences. Once the visitor attaches those ideals or experiences to the museum or object, a personal attachment is formed. At that point, the museum or object becomes culturally branded and can stand in for the ideals or experiences of the visitor.

Although this paper focuses heavily on the creation of icons, it must also be acknowledged that iconoclasm has been an important part of history and memory. The motivation for the destruction of icons usually stems from religious or political beliefs that contradict the creation of such symbols. In some religious or political systems, it is believed that certain subjects are inappropriate for icons. In Islam, for instance, it is forbidden to make icons of the prophet Muhammad, a rule that has been the focus of media attention lately due to the printing of political cartoons featuring Muhammad wearing a headdress shaped like a bomb. Another example from recent years would be the controversy over whether or not it is appropriate to use the Confederate flag on the Georgia State flag. This issue is based on the larger problem of what the Confederate flag represents as an American icon. For some, it is a positive

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[19] John Strausbaugh, *Rock 'Til You Drop: The Decline from Rebellion to Nostalgia* (New York and London: Verso, 2001), 180-182.

[20] Holt, 5.

symbol that inspires pride in American heritage. For others, it is a negative symbol that represents tragic social problems such as slavery, segregation, and overall racial inequality. Most cultural icons are attached to at least some controversy and many have been part of a long struggle over representation. These icons are part of the larger question of how people wish to represent themselves and their history.

Cultural icons also become associated with numerous myths that relate to this shared identity. Myths are often seen as a problem when museums and historic sites attempt to interpret and retell history, yet these myths can serve to increase the value of cultural icons. Visitors to a cultural icon who have been exposed to an associated myth often arrive with a preconceived attitude about the icon and are more likely to find that reflected in their visit, which can often lead to a reaffirming experience at the site. The visitor's role in cultural branding consists of "personalizing the brand's myth to fit [the consumer's] individual biography" and performing a "ritual action to experience the myth when using [the icon]."[21] When it comes to cultural icons, visitors are not coming to see them in order to learn so much as they are coming to validate the icon and the ideals or myths with which the icon is associated. This is not to say that visitors to iconic objects or places are not interested in learning anything, but education is not the primary purpose of their visit. Museums can nonetheless educate visitors by identifying these ideals or myths and using them as a starting point to develop exhibit text and other educational tools. These educational materials can be used to deconstruct myths and suggest alternative ways of viewing a subject.

Museums must be willing to adapt in order to remain relevant during shifts in American culture. Iconic museums and historic sites should identify which cultural characteristics they appeal to currently or wish to appeal to in the future. They must also recognize and adapt to shifting identity myths over time in order to remain cultural icons, but must do so in response to

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[21] Holt, 14.

dramatic and persistent changes, not temporary fads or superficial interests. Some museums today, for instance, seek to keep ties to the younger generation strong by incorporating new technology, but the real trick is to seek openings to tap into cultural branding, preferably using ideals that have persisted in some form or another over decades. This in turn allows opportunity for shared experiences among multiple generations and strengthens the visitors' connection to the museum or object. Museums do not need to support myths, however, but can use them as a hook to grab visitors' attention even as the myths are being deconstructed. If myths are to be deconstructed at a site, museums should do so carefully and with respect for the culture that has created the myths as well as the cultural icons. Museum professionals must remember that cultural icons are functions of heritage, which "is not a testable or even reasonably plausible account of some past, but a *declaration of faith* in that past."[22] It is this heritage that makes the museum visit most meaningful to the visitor.

While museums may wish to challenge the beliefs associated with visitors' heritage, they will not be able to educate if they attack their visitors' beliefs in a way that appears insulting to visitors' backgrounds. Some museums, such as the National Air and Space Museum, have learned this lesson by trial and error. The National Air and Space Museum had planned an exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, the B-52 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, which would examine the consequences of the atomic bomb and question the idea that it ended World War II. The exhibit was scheduled to open in 1995. There was a public outcry that the exhibition was unpatriotic and that it challenged--or outright offended--American values and the belief that America saved the world from war. In the end, the museum was forced to change its exhibit plans, displaying the *Enola Gay* with a simple, identifying text label.[23] Other museums must beware falling into the same trap and must be careful to consider their visitors' beliefs when

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[22] David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121.

[23] Richard Kurin, *Reflections of a Culture Broker* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 71-82.

interpreting cultural icons.

Perhaps the best example of a cultural icon in the business world adapting to change is Coca-Cola. Coke first became associated with the American way of life during World War II when it was shipped overseas to American troops. The effort to bring this product to the troops was backed by patriotic ads featuring Coke. Through this campaign, Coke came to represent American ideals and myths, such as "a country willing to sacrifice its sons and daughters . . . for democracy, a country with a unique and industrial spirit . . . and a country with the tenacious ingenuity to out-science the enemy in the race to the atomic age." By drinking Coke, "consumers could imbibe in collective feelings of national security."[24] This feeling is often what occurs among visitors to iconic museums or historic sites as they participate in history and share the experiences of those who have come before them.

Coca-Cola remained culturally relevant in the 1960s by altering its message to reflect a national movement for peace. Through commercials pairing whites with blacks and other minorities, Coke also appealed to the desire for equality and racial healing in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Coke's appeal to the idea of equality is best captured in the famous Andy Warhol quote:

> What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see a Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.[25]

Today, Coca-Cola continues to have a nostalgic appeal, but its prominence as a cultural icon is

[24] Holt, 22.

[25] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Books, 1977), 100.

fading because it has failed to remain connected to current cultural ideals.

Like Coca-Cola, museums, particularly those that possess or have become cultural icons, have had to alter their messages in order to accommodate changing attitudes in American culture. Museums and sites that posses cultural icons must also beware of latching onto fads. The ever-changing exhibitions in some museums make it easy for museum professionals to take on a fad mentality in order to keep up with changing times. However, most culturally iconic museums and sites are those that avoid sudden, drastic overhauls in approaches to their subjects. These museums give the impression of endurance and reliability while gradually adapting their messages to remain relevant in spite of changing public attitudes.

Chapter II

Cultural Icons: Creation and Characteristics

It is impossible to discuss cultural icons without giving thought to what they represent and the roles they fill. Cultural icons are different from other sites or artifacts because they embody or appeal to American ideals. These iconic objects and sites have been chosen to illustrate the past and to provide a tangible link to history. In addition to representing cultural ideals, cultural icons have numerous other identifiable characteristics which must be understood before steps can be taken to improve their interpretation.

Authenticity is one of the most important characteristics of cultural icons and also one of the major concerns in museums. According to David Phillips in *Exhibiting Authenticity*, "'authentic,' used as an attribute, seems to refer to properties which are not merely discriminating . . . but which identify the subject as in some way expressive of an abstract, universal truth."[26] "Authentic" is thought by many to mean truthful, honest, factual, accurate, or real. For better or worse, no exhibit is completely authentic and every museum experience is mediated, no matter how careful museum professionals are about maintaining authenticity. Even recent efforts to provide more socially and racially inclusive exhibitions, exhibitions which are thought to be more authentic, are reflective of the current culture and do not necessarily result in more accurate representations of history. The idea of "the authentic actual past" is a myth because it is an ideal beyond our reach.[27] There is no history without human interpretation and interference, so museums will never be able to teach the truth. A better approach, especially with cultural icons, is to try to teach the ways in which people have created and interacted with history. At its heart, the exploration of the formation of cultural icons has much to do with

[26] David Phillips, *Exhibiting Authenticity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 5.

[27] David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106.

museums recognizing their roles as mediators and knowing how to handle that role responsibly.

Cultural icons often represent moments of change. These icons are beneficial because they remind museum visitors of different times. They allow visitors to compare their present lives with the past in a way that is personally relevant and provide deeply meaningful points of reference. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for instance, marked a shift in attitude towards war in the United States. The site, which poignantly displays a tally of American lives lost, has provided a frame of reference in which to discuss the effects of war and allows for comparisons among war today, war in the 1960s and 70s, and war in earlier periods. Similarly, the late gorilla Willie B at Zoo Atlanta, remembered as a cultural icon and represented today by the Willie B Memorial Garden, provided an opportunity for discussions about shifts in the treatment and display of animals.

A study by historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen indicates that people trust information about the past obtained from museums more than any other source. Second to museums, people surveyed tend to trust personal accounts from friends or relatives. People seem to prefer museums because they contain actual objects from the past and concurrently offer opportunities to bond with other family members.[28]

Historic accounts, wherever they are found, have the greatest impact when they provide an opportunity for people to make connections to their personal histories. For instance, Rosenzweig and Thelen interviewed a 39-year-old woman who enjoys seeing movies involving John and Jacqueline Kennedy because the films remind her of what it was like to grow up in the early 1960s. Another man recalled reading a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. "because his mother had told him about living in the civil rights era 'and the things [King] went through when she was growing up.'"[29] People also want to learn about the past because they want to know

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[28] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 22.

[29] Ibid., 23.

more about "where they and their families had come from and how they had become the kinds of people they were."[30] Also confirming people's interest in making personal connections to the past are responses Rosenzweig and Thelen received regarding influential historic events. They asked survey participants, "What event or period in the past has most affected you?" The majority of people asked listed a personal event, often in connection with a public event. The public event was typically used as a frame of reference for telling a personal story.

Sites and objects that are cultural icons provide opportunities for sharing personal experiences. Many people look for chances to share or reconnect with their experiences when they visit museums or historic sites. The museums that become cultural icons are usually those at which many people have been able to have a shared experience with another person or other people. This is possible because cultural icons reflect shared cultural ideals. In a sense, museums serve as mediators between visitors and other people. Shared experience does not require immediate interaction between the person visiting the museum and the person or people with whom the visitor hopes to connect. This experience can be the result of a direct association, such as an Air Force pilot visiting the Air and Space Museum to share the experience of past pilots. Alternatively, the shared experience can occur indirectly by association, such as when a granddaughter of an Ellis Island immigrant visits Ellis Island herself in order to share an experience with her deceased grandfather. This indirect connection can also include people who have shared experiences with celebrities and others by watching their movies or listening to music, although they may never have had a direct interaction with the celebrity. People who visit Graceland Mansion, for instance, do so in order to reconnect to Elvis, with whom they have shared experience through movies and music. Often, the greater the number of people that share a connection with a museum or historic site--or an object contained within--the greater the number of people who visit the site and then go on to share their experiences with others.

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[30] Rosenzweig and Thelen, 46.

One important signifier of a cultural icon is its ability to attract pilgrims. In *The Art of Pilgrimage*, Martin Robinson is quoted as saying, "For most, the sense of treading ground made holy by past events is crucial . . . to sense in the numinous realm an atmosphere of awe and wonder. . . . The experience of the pilgrim in actually walking in the way of others enables them to become a participant in all that has happened. The pilgrim becomes one with all who have gone before."[31] Phillip Cousineau writes, "all of the answers are within us, but such is our tendency toward forgetting that we sometimes need to venture to a faraway land to tap our own memory."[32] This may seem like lofty language for a mere trip to a museum, but museum professionals would be remiss not to recognize that spiritual experiences do happen in their institutions. Many who travel to museums or historic sites are seeking to make a deeply personal connection with a cultural icon. This is the same sort of connection that is sought out at memorials, such as at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In fact, some memorials are also museums, like the Holocaust Memorial Museum that attracts numerous visitors and pilgrims each year.

Museums often function as modern pilgrimage destinations. People seek out these temples in search of the icons or relics that they believe have mattered or will matter most to them. People want to be moved spiritually by what they find, perhaps even more than they want to learn. In *Civilizing Rituals*, Carol Duncan writes:

> Our supposedly secular, even anti-ritual culture is full of ritual situations and events--very few of which . . . take place in religious contexts. That is, like other cultures, we, too, build sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it.[33]

The creation and veneration of cultural icons in museums is part of that attempt to order and explain our world.

Icons are commonly associated with religion. In fact, churches were some of the earliest

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[31] Phillip Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage* (Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1998), 96.
[32] Ibid., 34.
[33] Carol Duncan *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

creators and collectors of icons. Those who wanted to see the icons and experience their transformative power would embark on pilgrimages. Today, similar behavior can be observed in those wishing to see American icons. Pilgrimages are often taken to see objects or places that are considered icons of American history and culture, such as Graceland Mansion, the Statue of Liberty, or the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum.

People who go on pilgrimages to see cultural icons do so partly to satisfy a desire to participate in history. The interaction with cultural icons also serves to verify their existence. As Cousineau writes, "Contact with the relics at the end of the journey means getting in touch with the holy ground that spurs our faith onward."[34] Individuals are, from time to time, reminded of the fact that life is temporal. By visiting a cultural icon and confirming its existence, pilgrims are partly satisfying themselves that they have left a mark on the world. Pilgrims are reassured that their generation, or those that came before them, have made something that will communicate the messages of history on their behalf to those who come after them. Pilgrims also help create cultural icons as they go out and share their travel experiences with others, thereby encouraging others to visit cultural icons.

Americans often embark on pilgrimages to museums or historic sites for the purpose of having spiritual connections with their ancestors. Some museums seem to encourage these kinds of visits more than others. I recently accompanied a friend on her pilgrimage to Ellis Island, a historic site that is considered an icon of American immigration. She traveled to New York from Georgia in order to uncover details about her family's past. In particular, she went to Ellis Island in search of any evidence that might prove her great grandfather had traveled through there. Though she could have checked the passenger records online, it was important to her to visit the actual place. She, like many people who visit Ellis Island every year, believed that she could share an experience with her ancestors by standing in the place where they once stood.

[34] Cousineau, 17.

Our first stop at Ellis Island was the Immigration Center, where my friend quickly found not only her great grandfather's passenger records, but his father's records as well. For the rest of our time at the museum, she knew that she was walking where her ancestors walked. This made the museum visit an emotional experience much more than it was an educational endeavor. What was most important in my friend's visit to Ellis Island was her sense of purpose when she embarked on that pilgrimage, which allowed her to have a powerful encounter with Ellis Island. Though she was unable to speak to her ancestors, people who had passed away before she was born, she was at least able to share in their experiences by walking where they had walked. Ellis Island helps facilitate this type of encounter by allowing visitors to have self-guided tours in which there is as much time for reflection as the visitor desires.

Though children are unlikely to initiate a pilgrimage by themselves, even they are affected by the shared experience a pilgrimage offers. On a recent trip to the Gettysburg Battlefield, I met with the site's educational coordinator, Barbara Sanders. She explained that what seems to have an impact on children most when she leads activities is knowing that they are standing where Civil War soldiers once stood. When Sanders tells children they are standing on the battlefield, there is a murmur in the crowd and the students seem to instantly perk up. Inevitably, a student asks, "You mean someone died *right here*?"[35] The children's ability to connect with Civil War soldiers by standing in their footprints heightens their educational experience and may very well encourage them to embark upon their own American history pilgrimages in the future.

Adults have similar experiences at Gettysburg, though many of them are there specifically to satisfy their own intense purposes. Thousands of visitors, some of whom have ancestors who participated in the Civil War, travel to Gettysburg each year from all over the world to reenact the battle. Many of Gettysburg's visitors come to see the cemetery across the street from the battlefield. They ask park rangers to direct them to the place where Lincoln delivered his famous

[35] Barbara Sanders, interview by author, Gettysburg, PA., 13 January 2006.

address so that they might recite the address there, consequently making their own connection to this human icon from the past.[36]

This is not to say that every trip taken by anyone, anywhere, at any time has this profound significance. We all have memories of having been dragged to local museums or historic sites on school field trips. Nonetheless, for many people there is likely at least one museum or historic site to which they would go on a pilgrimage. Some might go to a site that allows them to connect to their heroes, such as the Baseball Hall of Fame. Others travel to places that remind them of memorable parts of their past, such as the National Museum of American History. Still others may take pilgrimages to places where they can honor the deceased, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

What is the result of pilgrimage and why might museums and historic sites want to encourage this practice? The answer is simply that, when pilgrims are moved by their experiences, when they find what they are looking for in their pilgrimages, they will encourage others to follow in their footsteps. This, in turn, gives museums and historic sites more opportunities to share their educational messages. In order to foster pilgrims, therefore, museums must do what they can to ensure that visitors to cultural icons are not only learning, but are also able to have the spiritual encounter they may be seeking. At sites with cultural icons, it is important to allow visitors time for uninterrupted involvement with the cultural icon.

Museums should not become like churches, however, but nonetheless should be open to pilgrims and should respect the potential for spiritual experiences in their institutions. The first and most important step to fostering pilgrims is to recognize these particular kinds of visitors and acknowledge their quests for spiritual connections to the past by offering plenty of areas for only uninterrupted interaction with the museum or historic site. In other words, visitors should have the chance to choose their own experiences to some degree. This does not mean museums

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[36] Sanders.

should not provide educational materials and programs, such as exhibition text or guided tours, but visitors who desire quiet time with a cultural icon should be able to have it whenever possible. For pilgrims, exhibition labels and educational programs are not the focus of their visit. Rather, these visitors have come on intense, personal quests to make a connection with the past. The memorial quality of these cultural icons must be preserved in order to satisfy a pilgrim's needs. At sites like Ellis Island, exhibition text provides educational information that visitors can choose to ignore depending on their needs. Rather than attempting to control every aspect of the visitor's experience, Ellis Island gives visitors plenty of opportunities to choose the type of experience they wish to have at the site.

Photographs also serve as icons that document and represent the pilgrimage experience. When we take photographs on trips, we do so in order to create a symbol of something we have experienced. We hope that these photographs will be capable of conjuring feelings associated with the memory of visiting a place of deep importance to us. Photographs are often made of people with cultural icons, such as a tourists at Battery Park standing in front of The Statue of Liberty. People want to document their interaction with the icon. They want to tell everyone, "I was here," and that the icon is part of their cultural identity. Interestingly, the cultural icons discussed in this paper are all at sites that allow photography, so visitors photographs may possibly have helped promote the objects and sites as cultural icons.

Though we can make some generalizations about why places or things become cultural icons, we must also recognize that each has its own story. The only way to fully understand the process is by looking at a particular site or object and "peeling back and examining the layers of interpretation that generations of Americans [have] imposed on it."[37] As stated before, cultural icons are created in a variety of ways. In some cases, a cultural icon becomes such as a result of the efforts of a group of people. These people develop an interest in the icon and convince other

[37] Amy J. Kinsel, "From Turning Point to Peace Memorial: A Cultural Legacy," *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows*, Gabor S. Borritt, editor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205.

members of the public to become involved as well. These groups of people take ownership of the site or object, often in a very public way, and help determine what cultural ideals the icon represents. The interest of these people eventually results in the making of a cultural icon.

The mere act of conservation can help elevate a site or object to iconic status. Conservation, particularly when the public is informed of or even involved in the project, gives a clear message to the public that the object or site concerned is of immense value. When such a movement takes place, it requires that the supporters of the object or site think about its meaning and value. The supporters are often required to verbalize that value in order to enlist the support of other citizens. This gives groups of people a sense of ownership of the site as they seek to pinpoint its significance and preserve that value by working to protect it. As we will see in our exploration of Gettysburg, for example, a major movement occurred in the late 19th century to protect the site from development by railroad companies. A small group of citizens enlisted the support of other citizens in order to preserve the battlefield and eventually succeeded.

Similar conservation battles have taken place more recently at Gettysburg and other places. A well-known example is the Star-Spangled Banner conservation project at the National Museum of American History, which began in 1998 and has received a great deal of public support. The conservation project resulted in an exhibition at the museum in which visitors could watch conservators work on the flag and learn about its significance. The culminating effect of this public attention is that the Star-Spangled Banner will eventually be reinterpreted in a new exhibition that will "present the history of the flag and evoke its significance as a national symbol."[38] There is a sense that cultural icons like the Star-Spangled Banner are fragile and are therefore more precious than other sites or objects. The public is aware that, without action, these icons may be lost and along with them might go memories of American history.

Cultural icons are sometimes created by the institutions that possess them. The act of

[38] "A New Home for a National Treasure," [online] (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, n.d., accessed 20 June 2006); available from http://americanhistory.si.edu/about/ssb.cfm; Internet.

making something--or someone--an icon by accessioning is nowhere more common than in a hall of fame. Halls of fame are basically icon factories. People and their things, be they musical instruments, clothing, equipment, or some other artifacts, are accessioned. By accessioning an object related to a person into a hall of fame, the person associated with the object becomes accessioned as well. In most cases, halls of fame can only hope that the people they have accessioned, and therefore their objects, will become cultural icons. Museums likewise have been known to acquire objects that they hope will prove to be good representations of culture or history. The Smithsonian Institution, for example, is constantly acquiring new objects in anticipation that they will adequately represent American culture from various time periods. In some cases, as with the ruby slippers, the museum does manage to help create a cultural icon. In other instances, the items that are accessioned stand little chance of becoming cultural icons, as is the case with the "puffy shirt" from the 1990s TV series *Seinfeld. Seinfeld*, which billed itself as a show about nothing, did not represent any lasting cultural ideals, so it seems unlikely that artifacts from the series will become cultural icons.

Marketing and media also contribute to the creation of cultural icons. If prior experience is a key motivator for individuals visiting museums, it stands to reason that the more publicity a site gets, the greater an icon it becomes as more and more visitors attend and spread the word. Museums with cultural icons benefit enormously from marketing and from media attention. Although museums are offering something far more substantial than commercial products like Coca-Cola, museums still rely on traditional marketing tools to promote themselves, such as posters, websites, newsletters, and even word-of-mouth advertising. Ellis Island has operated a highly successful advertising campaign over the years incorporating all of these elements. This campaign has served to promote the site as an icon of immigration and the American experience. In fact, many people do not even realize there were other ports of immigration in the United

States, nor do they realize that Ellis Island was only open for a brief period in history.

Duncan quotes Mary Douglas in *Civilizing Rituals* as saying, "A ritual provides a frame. The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft-repeated 'Once Upon a Time' creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales."[39] Marketing also fits into this ritual and helps create an air of expectancy. Posters are used to whet the visitor's appetite, not simply to inform the visitor about the exhibit. The same can be said for the large banners now so common on the facades of museums. Simply placing an image on a poster indicates to the public that the item is of exceptional value. The creation of such signs is part of the creation of cultural icons as well as the promotion of them.

Similarly, one can often determine the iconic objects within a museum's collection by visiting the museum store, either online or in person. A visit to the American Museum of Natural History's store reveals an array of products featuring the King of the Dinosaurs, T-Rex. There are T-Rex shirts, mugs, ornaments, bags, umbrellas, charms, and even ties. A visit to the gift shop at Gettysburg is overwhelming due to the volume of items available that promote the site. There are numerous maps and guidebooks, reenactment guides, copies of historic documents and newspapers related to the site, historic novels about Gettysburg, mugs, key chains, and just about any other product one can think of. The message is that Gettysburg is a place of such immense cultural value that it has inspired hundreds, if not thousands, of artists, writers, and historians.

Hollywood culture and its fans also help to produce cultural icons. Films have and will continue to become cultural icons. Celebrities themselves may also become cultural icons. Alternatively, a celebrity can participate in a project that delves so deeply into the public's identity values that the project propels the celebrity into iconic status. In any case, the objects associated with these iconic individuals and their projects can become cultural icons. This

[39] Duncan, 11.

phenomenon will be further examined when we look at Judy Garland's ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Cultural icons are created in many different ways and each has its own complicated story. This makes establishing generalizations about cultural icons extremely difficult. In the past, museums have been primarily concerned with what objects and sites were used for, when, and by whom, but there is a whole other history that is frequently missing from museum interpretation. This history is particularly valuable when it comes to the exhibition of cultural icons. What are the histories of some of these cultural icons? What can be gained by putting this complicated history on display? The following chapter will consider these questions through specific examples: The Gettysburg Battlefield, Willie B at Zoo Atlanta, Ellis Island, and the ruby slippers at the National Museum of American History.

Chapter III

Sharing the Histories of Cultural Icons

Part of the interest society has in history museums and historic sites is the need to preserve what is almost always perceived as threatened culture. There is a belief that if we do not save these sites and objects, our culture will become damaged or lost. This culture that we wish to preserve and share with others is a large part of our identity, both individual identity and community identity. In *A Shared Authority*, Michael Frisch discusses the idea of "civil religion," or "the existence in American culture of a set of shared beliefs, myths, 'meaning systems,' and historical images forming an essentially religious structure."[40] It is this civil religion that tells us who we are and where we fit in relation to other people. The characters and stories that are part of American culture, like the legend of George Washington and the cherry tree, can be likened to the kinds of stories found in Christianity and other religions.[41] These kinds of mythologies are part of every culture and museums must respect them, while also seeking to diversify and deepen the stories, characters, and their meanings. As Carr says in *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*:

> The museum is a place for the *construction* of meanings and their integration into the knowledge and experience one has; beyond this, the museum *itself* is a construction of meanings. Nothing is there by accident, not even its users. *At its best*, a museum offers a constructed situation, a place we seek out purposefully, in order to explore and revise the formative messages we intend to gather about ourselves, engaged as we always are in the process of self-identification, our *own* process of construction." [42]

In order to help the public more fully understand its culture, and its own personal stories, it is helpful to provide information not just about the events cultural icons represent, but about the cultural icons themselves. Background information about cultural icons should not be withheld by

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[40] Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 31.
[41] Ibid., 32-43.
[42] David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2003), 1.

curators and other privileged museum professionals; rather, it should be shared whenever possible with the public. Museum leaders need to begin a dialogue on ways to educate the public about the memory of historical events and how they are portrayed through cultural icons.

The following are examples of sites and objects that have become cultural icons possessing great meaning for the American public. They represent cultural ideals such as patriotism, American achievement, self-sacrifice, equality, faithfulness, and courage. These sites and objects offer important opportunities for museum visitors to connect or reconnect to the past. As stated in the Smithsonian's publication *Legacies*, "For an object to be more than a personal treasure, it must evoke events and individuals within the realm of public memory and reinforce current beliefs about the nation, its history, and its place in the world."[43] The history of these objects as cultural icons is important because these icons "record the ways that generations of Americans have imagined, valued, and preserved the past."[44] At some point, these objects may cease to be cultural icons as American lives and beliefs change, but the record of how and why certain things from the past become cultural icons will always be important and can tell us a great deal about ourselves, our country, and how we remember the past.

Changing the way that cultural icons are interpreted is extremely difficult. It involves changing the way that people think about history and entails convincing museum workers that the story of how the past has been interpreted and used is just as important as the institution's historical narrative. It means studying history's history. Museums would need to conduct visitor surveys as part of this alteration, finding out what visitors already know about cultural icons and how they understand and use the information they receive from museums. Though such an approach would require an overhaul of many institutions' exhibitions and educational programming, there are some things museums can do right away to begin providing this type of

[43] Steven D. Lubar and Kathleen M. Kendrick, *Legacies: Collecting America's History at the Smithsonian* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 59.

[44] Ibid., 59.

background information to visitors. These suggestions will be discussed at the end of each of the following case studies. At each of these institutions, visitors receive the majority of their educational information via written text; therefore, it is important that these sites begin their reinterpretation by reevaluating the written information available to visitors. Institutions must also consider the many ways that histories of cultural icons can be shared.

The Gettysburg Battlefield

The Gettysburg Battlefield, located in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and formally named the Gettysburg National Military Park, is the best-known Civil War historic site in the country. It is also a cultural icon. The battlefield today represents the sacrifice of American soldiers for national values, such as freedom and equality. Gettysburg represents drastic shifts in American culture and also has adapted to changes in culture over time. Numerous pilgrims visit Gettysburg each year, many seeking the sort of shared experience that is fundamental to cultural icons. The gravity of the Battle of Gettysburg itself is a large part of the reason the site has become a cultural icon. However, conservation was equally, if not more, important in the elevation of the site to iconic status. Since the battle, local residents and museum professionals have been fighting to preserve the Gettysburg Battlefield and the surrounding areas.

In the summer of 1863, following the battle, the town of Gettysburg was filled with the stench of more than 7,000 decaying bodies and thousands of rotting animal carcasses. The issue of conservation was immediate. The bodies of many soldiers were buried hastily in order to deal quickly with the problem. These bodies were later exhumed by residents to give soldiers a more honorable burial. The locals who performed this task searched the bodies for anything that would help identify the soldier. Dog tags were not issued back then, so soldiers of the Civil War

typically made their own ID tags out of scraps of leather, paper, or cloth. Once a body was identified, it was reburied individually. These individual graves can still be seen at Gettysburg today. (fig. 3) This practice of memorializing individual sacrifice was new at Gettysburg. Prior to the Civil War, soldiers were buried en masse and memorials were made either to a leader, the nation as a whole, or perhaps to commemorate the battle or war in general. The Civil War, however, was primarily a fight for human rights, so it made sense that the sacrifice of ordinary soldiers should be honored. This was the first time that the bodies of soldiers were buried individually.[45] In keeping with this memorialization of individuals, when Lincoln came to Gettysburg and delivered his famous Gettysburg Address, he spoke not of national sacrifice, but of the sacrifices of individual soldiers.[46] (fig. 4) These efforts to memorialize ordinary citizens were partly fueled by an interest in preserving the history of the battle and the site. By burying single soldiers, the local residents ensured the soldiers' names and roles in the war would be remembered throughout time.

Immediately following the Battle of Gettysburg, Gettysburg lawyer David McConaughy purchased large portions of the battlefield with the intent of preserving them, saying:

> There could be no more fitting and expressive memorial of the heroic valor and signal triumphs of our army . . . than the battlefield itself, with its natural and artificial defenses preserved and perpetuated in the exact form and conditions as they were in during the battle.[47]

Another Gettysburg lawyer with similar intentions, David Wills, appealed to the governor of Pennsylvania to purchase land for the burial and memorialization of the Union dead. This was eventually done and a fence was erected to separate the new cemetery from the town's existing one, thereby ensuring that the soldiers' cemetery would be protected as a unique memorial.

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[45] Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 37.

[46] Ibid., 52-53.

[47] Barbara L. Platt, *This Is Holy Ground: A History of the Gettysburg Battlefield* (Gettysburg, PA: Barbara Platt, 2003), 3.

Additionally, it was made clear that Gettysburg would honor only Union forces as the Confederates were still the enemy. Thus, these two men initiated efforts to commemorate the battle and the sacrifices of Union soldiers.

Pilgrims began to visit the battlefield almost immediately following the battle. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, museums and souvenir shops, usually combined businesses, began to spring up all around Gettysburg, not so much to attract visitors as to accommodate the countless visitors already coming to the battlefield. Getting to the battlefield was somewhat difficult because at that time the only way to reach the site was on foot. In 1884, however, the Gettysburg and Harrisburg Railroad Company built a rail line that entered into the current national park land. This line was not protested because its placement required little alteration of the terrain. A horse-drawn trolley also carried visitors to the battlefield and was tolerated by local citizens as well because of its low impact on the site. In 1891, though, the Gettysburg Electric Railway decided to try to replace the horse-drawn trolleys with an electric system and began work on this project in 1893. The Gettysburg Battlefield Commission, formed by local citizens, challenged the construction for fear it would damage the battlefield. Eventually, all rail lines were removed from the battlefield and little evidence of them remains today.[48] Landscaping efforts have been underway for years to help return the area to a state as close as possible to the one it was in during the Civil War. Conservation battles are being fought even now to preserve the historical integrity of Gettysburg. Recent proposals to build a casino and spa in the town have been violently opposed by locals, who have formed alliances with Gettysburg businesses to protest the development. Residents believe the project would ruin the historic nature and perceived authenticity of the area. The National Park Service, however, has remained neutral in the debate and has made the following statement:

> Although many national preservation organizations have publicly

[48] Platt, 15-20.

> expressed concerns about and opposition to a proposed gaming facility near Gettysburg, the National Park Service has not taken an official position because the proposed site for the complex is outside the boundary of the Gettysburg National Military Park, and outside the park's legislated "Battlefield Historic District."[49]

Currently, it seems plans to build a casino in Gettysburg have been halted, but the debate has served to unite citizens in support of preservation, which in turn helps maintain the site's position as a cultural icon.

As Kinsel writes, "The struggle to interpret the Battle of Gettysburg and determine which perspectives on the past would prevail began shortly after the fighting ended, and it ultimately engaged the energies of hundreds of people."[50] Lincoln led the move to turn Gettysburg into an icon of American history when he visited the site only a few months after the battle.[51] It was there, at the dedication of the new cemetery for Union soldiers, that he delivered his famous "Gettysburg Address," which resulted in immediate and persistent interest in the battlefield. "Before the 50th anniversary of the battle, Gettysburg entered the American imagination as an essential symbol of what the war had been about."[52] Over time, Gettysburg came to be associated with America's "successful postwar reconciliation." [53] Though the battlefield initially symbolized the victory of the Union army over rebels, Gettysburg "eventually glorified all the dead because they had exemplified what many people believed were distinctly American traits such as self-sacrifice, courage, and willingness to fight for one's convictions."[54] At Gettysburg, Americans have chosen to honor "the completeness of national reconciliation rather than closely examine the more troubling aspects of their country's past or present."[55] Today, there is a divide over the meaningfulness and effects of war, though these

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[49] Katie Lawhon, interview by author, Gettysburg, PA, 11 April 2006.
[50] Kinsel, 206.
[51] Ibid., 210.
[52] Ibid., 206.
[53] Ibid., 208.
[54] Ibid., 222.
[55] Ibid., 221.

changing attitudes are not reflected at Gettysburg.

Currently, visitors to Gettysburg are only given information about the battle itself when they visit the museum and battlefield. They are not provided with any information about the history of the battlefield as a historic site and museum, nor is any information included about changing attitudes toward the Civil War. However, the Gettysburg Battlefield "became not just a historic site but a sacred landscape, a memorial park which itself presented to Americans the basic elements of their historical and cultural interpretation of the Battle of Gettysburg."[56] Gettysburg's unique approach to memorializing the Civil War affected the memorialization of the Vietnam War as well as other wars. Both Gettysburg and The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial "have chosen to commemorate the valor and gallantry of soldiers"[57] in a way that honors the sacrifices of individuals. This is a positive aspect of Gettysburg's history that should be shared with visitors. Information about the various conservation movements at Gettysburg would also enrich the visitors' understanding of the site. Yet the less flattering aspects of the site's cultural history, particularly its early status as a memorial only for Union soldiers, should be shared as well. Currently, signs at Gettysburg and the site's official brochures do not mention its history as a Union memorial. Such information would not have a negative impact on visitors' experiences, but rather would help them understand how the site has adapted to changes in cultural ideals.

How can Gettysburg provide more information to visitors about the history of the site as a cultural icon? When one arrives at the battlefield, the first stop is often the visitor's center, which contains a museum exhibition about the Battle of Gettysburg, a gift shop brimming with books about the site and the Civil War, and a desk staffed by National Park Service rangers. At this desk, visitors can hire a guide to provide tours of the site in their cars. Visitors who do not wish to hire a guide can obtain a free brochure about the site and use this brochure to take a self-guided tour. Most visitors tour the site in their vehicles, driving along designated routes and

[56] Kinsel, 208.
[57] Ibid., 221.

stopping at marked locations to read text available on signs placed around the site. (fig. 5, 6) These signs primarily provide information about the progression of the Battle of Gettysburg over three days. They do not provide information about the site's history following the Civil War period and how the site evolved to become a cultural icon and historic site.

One way to ensure that visitors are given more information about the site's background would be to include this information in the current site's brochure. However, many visitors may not be aware that a brochure exists as they are kept somewhat discreetly at the information desk. One must ask a uniformed park ranger for this guide in order to receive it. Secondly, during multiple visits to Gettysburg, I observed few visitors actually reading the brochure. Many people simply use the map of the site printed on one side, if they use the brochure at all. Others have purchased their own guide books and do not need the free guide. Still others hire an interpreter to give them a tour of the site and also may not see the brochure. Many visitors, however, take advantage of the signs placed along the driving route on the battlefield.

Given these observations, it would perhaps be most effective to provide background information about the site as a cultural icon by using signs placed around the site. The map available at the information desk could utilize special symbols to indicate where such signs are located along the driving route. Since visitors seem to enjoy finding and reading the signs already placed on the battlefield, this approach would likely work well for including Gettysburg's history as a cultural icon. Many visitors get out of their cars at various points along the route to read the signs and walk over parts of the battlefield. Parking areas are provided along the sides of the roads in order to encourage this interaction with the battlefield. Such signs could be placed, for example, near areas that were once covered with rail lines. These areas and the battle over the rail lines could be used to frame the larger discussion of how conservation played a role in Gettysburg becoming a cultural icon. Additionally, signs could point out areas where historical

landscaping is underway or has been conducted as a means to preserve the site's authenticity. The text could discuss why such restoration is important. A sign placed in the cemetery near the site where it is believed Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address could explain how Lincoln's support of and presence at the site helped make it a cultural icon. It could also state that thousands of people visit the site every year in order to walk in Lincoln's footsteps and recite the address themselves. Finally, a sign in the cemetery should explain the significance of individual graves for the soldiers and address the cemetery's foundation as a burial ground for Union soldiers, also explaining how the site evolved to commemorate the sacrifices of all Civil War soldiers. Though the text would need to be brief, visitors would at least realize that it was not simply the Civil War that made Gettysburg such an important site in American memory. They would also be introduced to the idea that the process of documenting and remembering the battle and battlefield is ongoing.

Simply providing text is not enough, however. Gettysburg must also encourage its guides to incorporate the new information into their tours. Additionally, Gettysburg should incorporate this information into its existing website, which could include a section dedicated entirely to the role conservation has played in making the battlefield a cultural icon. (Gettysburg currently provides information about conservation on its website only as it relates to the institution's interest in authenticity.) The museum, which currently houses Civil War artifacts, could perhaps add an exhibit dealing with the evolution of Gettysburg from battlefield to icon. Because preservation is such a large part of why Gettysburg has become a cultural icon, educators may want to work more closely with the Gettysburg Battlefield Preservation Association, an organization that continuously works to provide for the site's conservation. Altering exhibition text should only be a starting point in the larger project of reinterpreting the Gettysburg Battlefield's history as a cultural icon.

Willie B at Zoo Atlanta

Willie B was a silverback gorilla who lived at Zoo Atlanta in Georgia for thirty-nine years. For twenty-eight of those years, Willie B lived in a one-room cage before he was released into a brand new, multimillion dollar habitat. (fig. 7, 8) The struggle to provide him with an adequate home helped make him a cultural icon as it brought to light the poor conditions in which animals were housed in Zoo Atlanta and in zoos throughout the country. Willie B came to represent American ideals such as equality and American achievement. Willie B was also part of important changes in American culture, particularly the animal conservation movement. This conservation movement at Zoo Atlanta propelled Willie B into the role of cultural icon. In addition, Willie B's longevity made it possible for people to form lasting emotional attachments to the gorilla and provided countless opportunities for shared experiences among visitors over the years.

I first became aware of Willie B's history as a young girl when my mother recalled her own childhood trip to Zoo Atlanta. My mother recently recalled her visit in detail:

> Willie B was at the end of [a] corridor in a glassed-in room that probably wasn't much bigger than our den. I remember I felt sorry for him. . . . I think I asked my father if he was happy in there. I think I remember [Willie B] looking sad, but my father said he was just a dumb animal and didn't know any better. . . . People thought differently back then. The public needed to be educated to the idea of habitats."[58]

Though several articles have been written regarding the conditions in which animals were kept at Zoo Atlanta prior to renovations in the 1980s and 1990s, little of this history is on display at the site itself. Moreover, there is no information regarding the significance of the animal rights movement in Georgia and why Zoo Atlanta was so late getting involved. As a result, visitors to the zoo have no idea what makes the experience of seeing animals in habitats so special. Those who visit Zoo Atlanta know Willie B was--and in many ways still is--one of the most famous

[58] Nickie Cole, interview by author, New York, NY, 1 April 2006.

zoo animals of all time, but many have no idea why. Zoo Atlanta, however, does acknowledge its unfavorable past in limited ways, primarily through information on its website, and perhaps has been more open about Willie B's journey to becoming a cultural icon than other institutions that are or possess cultural icons. The zoo has incorporated its past into its celebratory approach to current zoo displays and activities rather than using it as a way to encourage visitors to question museum methods or the means by which cultural icons are created. This celebratory attitude is common at many types of museums and is one of the primary problems that must be addressed in order for museums to better interpret cultural icons. As part of the movement towards transparency in museums, institutions must be more open about the struggles that make up their history rather than minimizing them or detachedly incorporating these battles into overly positive narratives.

In 1984, when Terry Maple took over as director of Zoo Atlanta, then called the Grant Park Zoo, he knew it was "one of the worst zoos in America."[59] The mayor of Atlanta had recently ordered an investigation of the zoo following the deaths of a tiger, a lion, and an elephant that had allegedly been sold illegally to a circus. In fact, Willie B was actually the second gorilla of that name: the first died prematurely of a virus while under the zoo's care. Terry Maple was hired in hopes that he could save the zoo from its pitiful state. Regarding his first visit to Zoo Atlanta, Maple wrote:

> On my first morning in Atlanta, I arrived early for a tour of the zoo. Willie B was sitting in a corner of his blue-tile cage. Behind bars and glass . . . Willie B was in jail through no fault of his own. He was in the prime of his life, just 17 years old. He was handsome, strong and capable, and completely alone.[60]

One writer described the condition of the zoo in 1984 as follows:

> Atlanta's century-old zoological park was a decaying avenue of

[59] Hoyt Coffee, "This Place is a Zoo," *Georgia Tech Alumni Magazine* 72, no. 3 (Winter 1996): 1.

[60] Terry L. Maple, "The Power of One," *The Apes: Challenges for the 21st Century* [conference proceedings] (Chicago: Chicago Zoological Society, 2001), 208.

> chipped concrete buildings and faded paint. Stressed jungle cats paced behind rusting steel bars, and monkeys chattered nervously, rendered neurotic by the lack of stimuli. The venerable silverback gorilla "Willie B" languished in a sterile cell with little to do and only cold tile on which to nap.[61]

The writer then goes on to call the zoo an "animal prison" that came very close to harming the animals it was intended to protect. The retarded development of the zoo contributed to the larger notion that the South was behind the times. When Willie B first came to Atlanta in 1961, segregation had only just begun to be abolished in parts of Georgia. The state was not yet ready to grant equal rights to all of its citizens, so it is no surprise that Georgia was late granting rights to its animals. The renovation of the zoo came at a time when peace and racial equality had become popular cultural values in Georgia and across the country. The black population in Atlanta had been steadily growing and the city was approximately two-thirds African-American at the time Terry Maple took over the zoo. Just the year before, Reagan signed a law making Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday and it became a state holiday the following year. Once the people of Georgia had been freed, at least symbolically, the time was ripe to free the animals. Therefore, the release of Willie B into a naturalistic habitat was representative not only of the struggle for animal rights, but it was also symbolic of the larger struggle for equality in the South.

The media coverage of Willie B and Zoo Atlanta's gorilla conservation project also helped make him a cultural icon. It is largely the media, and not the zoo, that has documented and made available Willie B's journey to becoming a cultural icon. Both local and national news organizations covered Willie B, though interest increased drastically during the period leading up to and following the building of the new gorilla habitat. As time went on, the articles became more politically charged in nature and elicited a more emotional response from the public. *TIME*

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[61] Coffee, 1.

magazine released an article in 1979 that reported Willie B's television-viewing habits, including the fact that "he hates news and talk shows, but he loves football and gets so excited that he sometimes charges at the set, waving a fist."[62] The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported on Willie B regularly, including Zoo Atlanta's decision to return Willie B's cremated remains to Cameroon, "the big guy's birthplace."[63] Countless readers contributed to the media attention through letters, some lamenting the zoo's condition, others praising Willie B, and some ridiculing the zoo for its decisions. In addition, the new habitat was funded by the Ford corporation, which automatically resulted in increased publicity of the habitat, called the Ford African Rain Forest. Zoo Atlanta cooperated on the rescue of other male gorillas from different parts of the United States, which led to even more press coverage and aroused attention nationwide. Meanwhile, Terry Maple, the leader of Zoo Atlanta's conservation efforts, was elevated as a hero among zoological communities nationwide. All of these facts are now part of Zoo Atlanta's celebratory approach to its past.

Though Willie B's plight contributed to his becoming an icon, his longevity was also a factor. People who visited Zoo Atlanta to see Willie B in his early years later returned with their children and grandchildren. The gorilla provided an opportunity for people to share their memories. He was always at the zoo and could be depended upon as a stable focal point for discussion among generations of people. Even after his death, Willie B continues to offer opportunities for shared experiences as people return to the zoo to see the gorilla habitat and visit a sculpture representing him in the Willie B Memorial Garden. Zoo Atlanta still welcomes "parents and grandparents [who sit] on the stone benches as they tell their children and grandchildren their own memories of the gentle giant who proudly walked out of his one-room home of 27 years to become one of the world's most famous silverbacks."[64] Zoo Atlanta should

[62] "Prime-Time Primate," *TIME* (22 January 1979).

[63] "Willie B's Return to Homeland, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (12 February 2000), 2C.

[64] "Ambassador Willie B," *Zoo Atlanta Animals* [web site]; available from http://www.zooatlanta.org/animals_willieb.htm; Internet; accessed 1 April 2006.

take advantage of these visitors' eagerness to make connections and use it to educate the public about the zoo's history and Willie B's development as a cultural icon.

At the time of Willie B's death, an article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution said that, "[Willie B's] story symbolized not only the development of Zoo Atlanta into a world-class institution, but the evolution of the city of Atlanta itself."[65] It would be interesting if visitors to Zoo Atlanta were given this information when they visited the gorilla habitat, rather than only having access to the basic scientific news prevalent in zoo exhibition labels, which visitors enamored with live animals often neglect to read. (fig. 9) Visitors' experiences would be enriched by knowing how what they see at the zoo today differs from what previous visitors, visitors who came prior to the building of the gorilla habitat, have seen. They would also have a deeper appreciation of what makes habitats special and, perhaps, could even be told why habitats remain a controversial means of protecting and studying animals. Most importantly, however, visitors should understand why Willie B became a cultural icon, what he provided and represented for Georgians, and how his experience reflected greater changes taking place in Georgia in the 1970s. Visitors could even be made to understand that because zoo animals are living, breathing creatures, they perhaps posses even greater power than museum objects to become cherished American icons.

Zoo Atlanta has already set up a venue to talk about Willie B as a cultural icon through the creation of the Willie B Memorial Garden, which includes a sculpture of the gorilla. (fig. 10) At this site, Zoo Atlanta could provide information to visitors by placing signs at the memorial that explain Willie B's ascendance to iconic status and what he represented and provided for Georgians during his lifetime. Because the memorial garden does not include live animals, visitors may be more likely to read text in this meditative area. When visiting the Willie B Memorial Garden, visitors are already discussing what the gorilla meant to them and this should be

[65] "Atlanta Grew Up with Willie B," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3 February 2000, 14A.

encouraged. Future visitors, however, will need to be educated about who Willie B was and why he was important to Georgians. They will also need to know how his plight helped change the way zoos are operated. Otherwise, the memorial garden and sculpture will cease to have significance as time passes. Zoo Atlanta should consider creating an exhibit that tells Willie B's story in a way that is meaningful to visitors. The zoo could possibly recreate Willie B's one-room cell, complete with his television, and use it as a venue for discussing his status as a cultural icon. The exhibit could include video and photos that illustrate Willie B's story. This venue could also be used to talk about changing attitudes in animal conservation. The contrast between the habitats and the cage would help keep Willie B's story from losing significance over time and would add meaning and purpose to the memorial, allowing visitors to form connections with Willie B for decades to come.

At present, Zoo Atlanta seems to assume visitors to the site will already know and understand Willie B's significance. While this may be true at the moment, in years to come Zoo Atlanta may have more and more visitors who do not know the story of Willie B. Children growing up today will have no knowledge of the earlier treatment of animals nor of the civil and animal rights movements. Signs or an exhibit placed near the Willie B Memorial Garden can provide this information and give new visitors the opportunity to connect to Willie B as a cultural icon. Moreover, such information would provide additional topics for discussion among visitors, particularly intergenerational visitors, and allow for the type of shared experience that is so central to cultural icons. By placing informative signs in the garden, the zoo can ensure that visitors understand why the garden is there and how zoos, rather than simply being family amusement parks, actually participate in the making of history as well as science.

Ellis Island

Ellis Island is an extremely potent symbol in American culture. This historic site is the most important venue of United States immigration in American memory. No other location in the country, or perhaps even in the world, has been so forcefully tied to the immigrant experience in America or elsewhere. Ellis Island taps into the shared identity values of Americans as immigrants, values such as patriotism, freedom, and American achievement. America itself is defined as a nation of immigrants, based largely on the fact that most Americans trace their heritage to Europe and other continents. Ellis Island, a popular pilgrimage destination, provides an opportunity for shared experiences among generations of people--people who are able to find some part of their stories among the multilayered meanings Ellis Island offers.

As immigration and diversity became increasingly important issues in America in the last quarter of the 20th century, Ellis Island became a hugely popular historic site. Its popularity was part of the change in America from a melting pot to a multicultural community, a change marked by citizens' increased interest in genealogical research. Those Americans who were not recent immigrants and were therefore unable to tie into the growing interest in immigration issues felt a need to connect with this topic by uncovering their families' pasts. They were able to do this via visits to cultural icons, such as Ellis Island. Such a pilgrimage appealed to many Americans regardless of background, including those whose families did not immigrate through Ellis Island. Advertisements of Ellis Island do not usually point out the actual number of immigrants that came through there in the relatively short time the center was open. Instead, the advertisements market Ellis Island as *the* gateway to America.

Ellis Island has almost exclusively been tied to the experience of the average working-class citizen because first and second-class passengers did not pass through there. In addition, the site positions itself as a representative of immigrants from all countries, even though the people who

passed through came primarily from western European countries like Ireland and Italy. A sign in the entryway at Ellis Island (fig. 11) drives this point home:

> Following restoration in the 1980s, this building reopened as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, a symbol of this nation's immigrant heritage. . . . These exhibits also portray and give voice to the immigrants themselves. Each of their stories is unique, and bears witness to the courage and determination that enables men and women to leave their homes and seek new opportunities in an unknown land. [66]

As with Gettysburg and Willie B, the mere act of conservation can help elevate a site or object to iconic status. When a site is threatened by degradation or by development, it lends to the view of the site as a precious thing, something that is rare and can easily be destroyed. Conservation gives a clear message to the public that the object or site concerned is of immense worth. When such a movement takes place, it requires that the supporters of the object or site define its value. They are often required to verbalize that merit in order to enlist the endorsement of other citizens. This gives people a sense of ownership of the site as they seek to pinpoint its significance and preserve its virtue by working to protect the site. Ellis Island solidified its status as a cultural icon through conservation projects. The restoration project of 1984 to 1990 attracted a great deal of public attention and monetary support. Once reopened in 1990, Ellis Island served the public as an icon of American immigration and the diversity of the United States.

Part of Ellis Island's role as a cultural icon came about because of the site's proximity to the Statue of Liberty, which was donated to the United States by France in 1880. When the Statue of Liberty was first given to the United States, Americans did not yet perceive a powerful association with American ideals. When Ellis Island opened, however, the statue became increasingly important and reached full-fledged iconic status in the 1930s as America began imposing restrictions on immigration.[67] Since that time, the statue has been associated with the

[66] Ellis Island National Monument, exhibition label in baggage room, 27 February 2006, New York, NY.
[67] Barbara Blumberg, *Celebrating the Immigrant* (Boston: National Park Service, 1985), 10.

idea that America welcomes and is enriched by all immigrants. Protesters of the United States' current and proposed immigration policies have been seen carrying signs quoting the first few lines of the poem at the base of the statue:

> Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me,
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door![68]

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed an immigration bill ending national origins quotas in a ceremony on Liberty Island, further encouraging the view of the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of liberty and equality for all people, regardless of ethnic origin. That same year, Ellis Island was incorporated as part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument and the two sites became permanently linked. The formal attachment of Ellis Island to the Statue of Liberty paved the way for the immigration port to become a cultural icon.

Again, the movement to conserve Ellis Island in the 1980s played a large part in the process of the site becoming a cultural icon. The restoration of Ellis Island actually was an extension of the effort to preserve another station as part of a larger interest in commemorating the immigrant experience. Castle Clinton in Battery Park, Manhattan, which was an early immigration port, was going to be demolished in the 1950s in order to build a Brooklyn-Battery Bridge. The project was immediately opposed by the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society. Castle Clinton was ultimately saved by President Eisenhower when he made the site a national monument in 1956.[69] William H. Baldwin, a trustee of the Preservation Society proposed using Castle Clinton as an immigration museum, but the museum was actually built much later on Liberty Island and opened in 1972. It remained open until 1991, just after the immigration museum opened on Ellis Island. Efforts are currently underway to restore the

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[68] Blumberg, 10.
[69] Ibid., 28.

remaining buildings on Ellis Island and open some of these buildings to the public. These ongoing conservation efforts are an important part of Ellis Island's history as a cultural icon and should be part of its interpretation.

Ellis Island focuses so heavily on the site as an immigration station that it largely ignores the building's history as a museum. Visitors receive no information about how the site became a cultural icon, aside from the celebratory information regarding Ellis Island as the primary site of American immigration. Americans are led to believe, through vehicles like advertising media and history textbooks, that nearly every person's ancestors traveled through Ellis Island and that this is what makes the site a cultural icon. The message is that those who care about their heritage should visit Ellis Island. In fact, the majority of Americans do not trace their ancestry back through Ellis Island. Rather than depending solely on interest in heritage to enrich the visitor experience, the site would do well to tell visitors more about how it became a cultural icon. This information would serve to enrich the institution's educational efforts.

Like Gettysburg, Ellis Island does not openly offer brochures to visitors upon arrival. Any information available must be requested at the information desk, which prominently displays brochures about the site's American Family Immigration History Center, where visitors can search passenger records to find information about their ancestors. The most noticeable sign on the first floor likewise points visitors to the Immigration Research Center. Visitors to the site are greeted by exhibition signs immediately and plunged into their Ellis Island experience with little guidance or background information. (fig. 12, 13) It is assumed the the visitor already understands how Ellis Island became such an important site in American culture.

Because the tours at the site are normally self-guided, an informative brochure made available at the entrance to the museum would be helpful. A better solution would be to provide brochures to visitors at Castle Clinton or Liberty State Park, where they are required to purchase

ferry tickets in order to reach Ellis Island. This would allow interested visitors to prepare themselves for their museum experience during the roughly 20-minute ferry ride to the island. The brochure could provide information about the evolution of the site as a cultural icon, particularly noting the significance of its proximity to the Statue of Liberty and its relationship to the Statue of Liberty Foundation, since this is largely responsible for the site having become a cultural icon. Additionally, the brochure could explain that Ellis Island was chosen to become an icon that represents the American immigration experience and that this role did not come about naturally or spontaneously.

An even more creative solution could involve stationing guides on the ferries to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. These guides could discuss the significance of both sites as cultural icons, explaining how the two became joined in American memory and how this association has affected Ellis Island over the years. The brief talk could include a personal story of an immigrant and possibly his or her descendants, providing both a frame of reference for the trip and a way for non-pilgrims to form personal connections with the site. Visitors should also be encouraged to think actively about what Ellis Island means to them. Along these lines, Ellis Island could even consider implementing a volunteer docent program in which introductory talks would be given by people who passed through Ellis Island or their descendants. Such programs have worked well at institutions like the Museum of Jewish Heritage, which has had Holocaust survivors and their descendants act as interpreters. If this seems impractical, the same effect could possibly be achieved through an introductory video, which ideally visitors could view either before or during the ferry trip.

Another possibility would be to provide information about the site's history as a cultural icon on signs at or near the entrance to Ellis Island. Visitors would have the opportunity to read about the site's history as a museum and cultural icon before finding themselves seduced by Ellis

Island's story. Such transparency would not detract from the site's value, but rather add to it by giving visitors a more complete framework in which to place their experiences. Openly discussing the elevation of Ellis Island to iconic status would also provide an additional way to connect to the numerous pilgrims that travel to the site each year. These pilgrims, already interested in learning about the immigration process their ancestors endured, are also likely to be interested in the preservation of the site as a museum and may enjoy knowing more about the process by which it became so important to American memory. They may likewise find themselves making connections to other pilgrims who have traveled to Ellis Island simply by learning more about the role of the pilgrim in the transformation of Ellis Island into a cultural icon. Also, visitors would realize that they are contributing to the site's status as a cultural icon by visiting and sharing their experiences with others. Rather than allowing visitors to become a passive audience that is shepherded through a fictional immigration experience, additional information could help them understand that their visit to Ellis Island, and their reaction to the exhibitions, makes them participants in the site's history and evolution.

The Ruby Slippers at the National Museum of American History

Once each year when I was growing up, *The Wizard of Oz* would air on network television. It was a big deal in my house, because that was the only night of the year my brothers and I were allowed to stay up past bedtime. We would pile on our parents' bed and watch Dorothy skip her way to Oz in those magical ruby slippers. I secretly wished my leather Buster Browns would be replaced with sparkling ruby slippers one night while I was sleeping. I was an adult before I finally visited those slippers at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It was not until I began research for this paper that I realized the Smithsonian's pair is

one of several pairs of ruby slippers that share an incredibly complicated history. Though there are several pairs of ruby slippers, the shoes at the Smithsonian are considered cultural icons. Called "The People's Slippers"[70] by some, they are part of a group of objects considered to be "national treasures" by the museum, objects that "[represent] an effort to capture something valuable about America--a story, an idea, a way of life."[71] These slippers represent for many people the innocence of childhood, the magic of Hollywood, and faithfulness to home and family. Their meaning is multilayered and they have provided countless opportunities for visitors to have shared experiences. As with many other cultural icons, the complicated history of the ruby slippers is not on display at the Smithsonian. Many have feared that publicizing the history of the slippers might ruin the magical quality they seem to exude for visitors, but in fact this history only adds to their intrigue and value.

The pair of ruby slippers at the Museum of American History were reportedly worn by Judy Garland in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, based on the book by L. Frank Baum. It is believed, as the exhibition label states, that the slippers were worn in skipping and dancing scenes. The ruby slippers were originally not supposed to be red, rather the shoes were going to be silver as they are in the book. Revision notes written between May 14 and June 4 of 1938 changed the color of the slippers in the movie to ruby. The producer, Louis B. Mayer, had already paid $3 million to produce the film in Technicolor, so he was not about to allow boring, silver shoes in his new color film.[72]

Visitors do not seem to be concerned with whether or not the Smithsonian's slippers are the only pair. Though with some museum objects the exhibition label may become more valuable than the object, because it serves as a certificate of authenticity, visitors apparently do not need

[70] Rhys Thomas, *The Ruby Slippers of Oz* (Los Angeles: Tale Weaver, 1989). Though much of the chronicle of the ruby slippers remains a mystery, Thomas provides the only detailed account available of this history.

[71] Lubar and Kendrick, 22.

[72] Thomas, 15.

this kind of verification for the ruby slippers.[73] During multiple visits to the Museum of American History, I observed very few visitors reading the slippers' exhibition label: they know exactly what these objects are and why they are significant. The slippers, which are currently not on display, were previously displayed in a relatively simple manner. (fig. 14, 15) They were placed on a simple pedestal with a Plexiglas bonnet and a large black-and-white image of Dorothy behind. It is clearly not the exhibition design or interpretation that contributed to their becoming cultural icons. The ruby slippers are among the most popular objects at the Museum of American History, and it is estimated that four to five million people see the ruby slippers at the Smithsonian each year.[74] These slippers are popular largely due to the popularity of the film. The televising of *The Wizard of Oz* contributed heavily to it becoming a culturally iconic film. Without television, the film may very well have been lost to generations of people. The ruby slippers are familiar to people in numerous countries because television, video, and now DVD have made it possible for people all over the world to see *The Wizard of Oz*, form their own attachments to the film, and assign meaning to the film and the slippers.

The ruby slippers are surrounded by controversy and enigma. It has long been a mystery exactly how many pairs were originally made, where they have been since the film was produced, and how many are still in existence. There exist four known pairs of slippers from the movie production, two of which were acquired by private Hollywood memorabilia collectors, and one test pair, owned by actress Debbie Reynolds. The shoes owned by the Smithsonian were given by an anonymous donor in 1979 who probably purchased the shoes at a 1970 studio auction for $15,000. Another pair was won by a woman named Roberta Bauman in a 1940 contest to name the best movies of 1939. This pair was sold at auction by Bauman in 1988 for $165,000. The same pair sold again in 2000 for $665,000. It is interesting to note how much the auction value of

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[73] John Strausbaugh, *Rock 'Til You Drop: The Decline from Rebellion to Nostalgia* (New York and London: Verso, 2001), 183.

[74] Thomas, 15.

the Bauman slippers increased in only twelve years.[75] During this time, there was a large amount of publicity about the slippers and the media frenzy likely contributed to the public's interest in the slippers, thereby increasing their value at auction. However, it is not their monetary value that has made the slippers a cultural icon. The driving force behind their elevation to culturally iconic status was their acquisition by the Smithsonian, an act that indicated to the public that the ruby slippers were items of national importance and reinforced the values Americans already saw in the slippers.

In addition, the mysterious background of the slippers added to the public's interest. According to their mythology, the slippers were found by a costumer and Hollywood memorabilia collector, Kent Warner, in an old costume warehouse. There were possibly around seven pairs found, some of which were destroyed by Warner due to their poor condition and the desire to maintain the uniqueness of the slippers, thereby elevating the value of the remaining pairs. In the early days of their discovery, it seemed important to have only a single known pair, so all but one pair was kept secret when they were found. As more pairs became known, however, it only served to increase interest in the shoes and created a frenzy among those with the means to acquire a pair.[76] Even today, many people labor to create their own pairs of ruby slippers or pay "experts" to make ruby slippers for them.

It seems the more the public knew about the slippers, the more valuable they became, so the Smithsonian could provide a more detailed background of the slippers to its visitors without fear of ruining the magic they possess. Understanding the background of the ruby slippers would help visitors to appreciate how such objects become iconic. The museum could even provide information about these slippers in relation to the other pairs and encourage visitors to question why, in spite of the fact that there are multiple pairs, the Smithsonian's ruby slippers continue to be cultural icons. Visitors could also understand how movies, the media, and auctions serve to

[75] Thomas, 219-226.
[76] Ibid., 219-226.

help create the kinds of cultural icons that the Smithsonian seeks to collect and how acquisition by the Smithsonian affects an object's status.

The Smithsonian is currently in the process of closing the National Museum of American History as part of a two-year rebuilding and reinterpretation project. There are currently no known plans to dramatically alter the exhibition of the ruby slippers; however, this would be an ideal time for the museum to consider reinterpreting them. The exhibition label that formerly accompanied the slippers provided only very basic information:

> Dorothy Gale, played by 17-year-old Judy Garland, wore these slippers in the classic 1939 MGM film based on L. Frank Baum's novel. In Baum's stories, the magical shoes are silver; in the film, they were changed to ruby-red to capitalize on the richness of the Technicolor film process. Several pairs were made for the film. Garland wore this pair for dance scenes because their felt soles muffled her footsteps on the yellow brick road.[77]

Because the museum provides information about the ruby slippers through a simple text label, it would be easy to provide more in-depth information to visitors via revised text. As mentioned, though, few visitors read the label at all, so the museum should consider altering the display of the slippers altogether in order to encourage visitors to pay closer attention to the text. The slippers could be interpreted using a brief series of text labels and images that would illustrate their rise to cultural icon. In particular, the museum needs to address the significance of *The Wizard of Oz* broadcast on national television as it relates to the slippers. The Smithsonian must also consider its own impact on the ruby slippers' iconic status.

Alternatively, it would be wonderful if the National Museum of American History did an entire exhibit that focused on the significance of the shoes in the 1940s through the present. The exhibit could talk about how the slippers' meaning changed over time as they became cultural icons. The exhibit could also ask visitors to consider what the shoes meant to them as children

[77] National Museum of American History, "The Ruby Slippers," exhibition label, 2006.

versus what they mean to them today. The museum could even provide an audio booth in which visitors could listen to, and even record their own, thoughts and memories of the slippers. This would help make the exhibit more interactive and meaningful. For example, when I was a child, the shoes represented the glamour of Hollywood and the allure of women's fashion. I was a little girl then watching a seemingly very grown-up Judy Garland. As an adult, however, I find that the slippers represent my lost childhood, complete with the culture I grew up in. As America becomes an increasingly casual society, the slippers make me long for the days when I was required to wear white gloves to church. Visitors could likewise find themselves identifying similar memories that allow them to more fully understand the slippers' value as cultural icons. In this way, the National Museum of American History could strengthen the educational merit of the ruby slippers exhibition. The museum should not assume visitors will understand the historical and cultural meanings of the shoes and will spontaneously form connections to them. Instead, it ought to take advantage of the opportunity to explain the significance of its objects, particularly those objects that have become cultural icons.

Conclusion

Because the meaning of cultural icons changes over time, they remind us that history is a dynamic thing and it belongs to everyone. The interests of the public, and changes in those interests, have an enormous influence on what becomes iconic and what does not. The process by which historic sites or objects become cultural icons should be recognized and included as part of institutional history. Knowing how and why sites and objects become cultural icons can help visitors understand how history is made and recorded and how they are participants in this process. Visitors to museums will no longer think of them as authorities on subjects, but as creators of history of which the public is a part.

Because cultural icons are expected to carry so much meaning for their patrons, museums must be extremely cautious in the way they are interpreted. This is especially true if museums seek to deconstruct the myths surrounding cultural icons. Museums are charged with the responsibility of representing history in a truthful manner, which can seem to be nearly impossible when dealing with such notable sites or objects. Myths serve to elevate cultural icons, yet they frequently become obstacles to overcome in interpretation. At Gettysburg, for instance, the site must be clear about its stance that the Civil War was fought to end the South's practice of slavery, but in doing so it risks insulting visitors who view Gettysburg as a place where thousands of Southerners were killed while defending states' rights.

Another problem with interpreting cultural icons is that museums have less control over how visitors perceive them than they do over other objects or sites because of visitors' previous experiences with or knowledge of the icons. Visitors who travel to see cultural icons often have ideas about what they will see when they get there. At times, they may have already decided how they feel about the cultural icon in question. Museums must be aware of this when they attempt to interpret cultural icons and find creative ways to use visitors' previous experiences to

enhance their education.

As time passes, icons will continue to be affected by changes in American culture. The cultural icons discussed in this paper were all created prior to September 11, 2001. Much of the literature concerning these sites and objects was likewise written before 2001. This paper, therefore, reflects American ideas and attitudes that will no doubt change as we venture further and further into the post-9/11 world. Even now, there exist numerous examples of the ways that cultural ideals are changing and affecting the messages communicated by cultural icons. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which many have declared a warning to leaders contemplating war, no doubt has new significance to Iraq War soldiers and their families. It is a warning unheeded, clearly ineffective as a deterrent to war. Some visitors to Ellis Island in coming years may find themselves torn between being proud of America's immigrant past and worrying about its future as a haven for undocumented workers. Zoo visitors and workers are already beginning to question the ethics of keeping animals in enclosed habitats for protection and study. Even Judy Garland's ruby slippers may be replaced as a cultural icon by other magical objects if *The Wizard of Oz* is replaced in public memory by recent films like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. All of the icons discussed in this paper will be affected by changes in America's culture. How they respond to the changes could determine whether or not they remain cultural icons, but so many factors are involved that nothing can guarantee any site or object iconic status.

Exposing the history and myths surrounding cultural icons, even if that history can be perceived as negative, will not detract from their status as cultural icons. For example, in Sautee-Nacoochee, Georgia, there is a mound with a gazebo built on top that has become a cultural icon for Northeast Georgia. The story goes that the mound marks the spot where a Cherokee princess and her lover from a rival tribe died together after leaping from the cliffs of nearby Mount Yonah. When I was a little girl, this story was presented to me as fact. As an adult, however, I learned

that the site and its narrative had been created to provide a historic landmark that would attract tourists to the area and promote Northeast Georgia's Cherokee heritage. Despite its lack of authenticity, the Sautee-Nacoochee mound had already become so important to the community and to regular visitors as a marker of their Native American past that it has mattered little that the tale was false. Artificially aged scrolls proclaiming the story are available in local shops and a bronze marker alerts tourists to the site and its narrative. The only thing that has changed is that the story is now called a local legend rather than fact. What visitors are not told is why and how the mound and its legend became so important to the area. This is the type of information that museums should seek to provide for visitors to cultural icons.

Museum professionals must be cognizant of the fact that cultural icons are influenced by an increased interest in national heritage. In fact, there has been a major movement in the last couple of decades to preserve American heritage. As David Lowenthal points out, "Heritage is no longer confined to the rich and the powerful; it now belongs to everyone. . . . And heritage also now embraces things and ideas that give us *collective* identity."[78] This explains why visiting cultural icons, as part of heritage tourism, has become so popular an activity. Many of the icons examined in this paper are related to most Americans in some way, regardless of that person's background. Moreover, public movements to preserve heritage have reinforced the idea that these cultural icons are everyone's legacy. What is most interesting about the interpretation of cultural icons is that it is often assumed that visitors understand why the site or object is important. Museums do not seem to find it necessary to explain why certain things or places become cultural icons, even though this type of study could reveal interesting information about the way a community remembers events or how cultural icons evolve from these memories. The increased use of technology in museums and historic sites, particularly the use of websites, makes it easier than ever to share information about cultural icons that goes beyond what visitors might normally

[78] David Lowenthal in John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 43.

learn in museums.

In *Tangled Memories*, Sturken observes that "Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history. . . . We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present."[79] It is not simply that a cultural icon exists and is tied to history that is important, but also what that cultural icon represents and how it was created. Communities have been remembering the past through stories and cultural icons for centuries and they will continue to do so. Museums and historians need not fear this process and it should not be avoided. These icons and their myths do not need to be corrected so much as they need to be better understood.

As people learn more about what makes their favorite museum objects and sites special and how cultural icons are created, they may begin to more readily acknowledge themselves as participants in history and co-authors of the stories museums tell. This knowledge of cultural icons provides a context that each person is connected to in some way, a context that can deepen visitors' understanding and appreciation of museum objects and historic sites. They will understand that when they perform mundane actions, like watching *The Wizard of Oz* on television, viewing a commercial that features Ellis Island, or buying a product with an *American Gothic* parody on the label that they are actually witnessing--and even participating in--the creation of cultural icons.

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[79] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-2.

Fig. 1. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930,
The Art Institute of Chicago

Fig. 2. Gordon Parks, *U.S. Government Charwoman*
or *Ella Watson*, 1942, Library of Congress

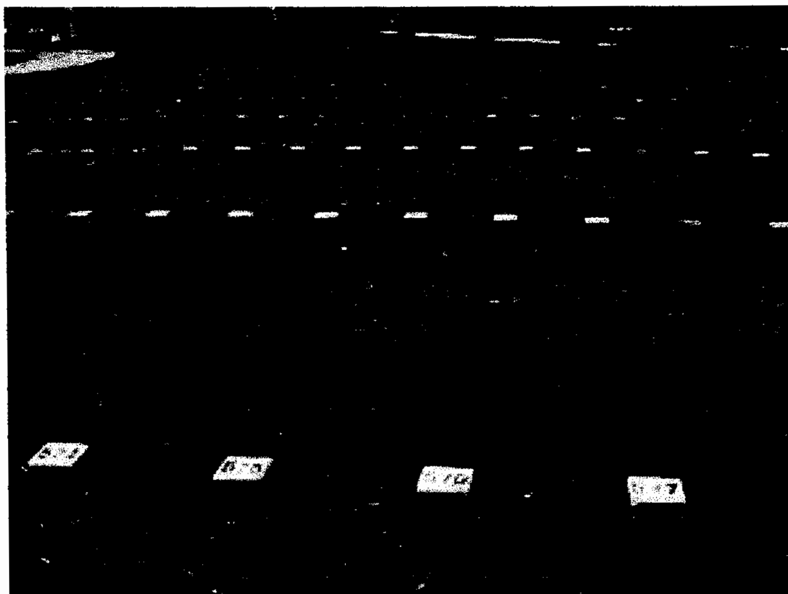

Fig. 3. Gettysburg National Cemetery, Gettysburg, PA,
Union grave markers

Fig. 4. Lincoln Speech Memorial, Gettysburg National Cemetery

Fig. 5. Road through Gettysburg National Military Park

Fig. 6. Exhibition sign on the Gettysburg battlefield

Fig. 7. Willie B watching television in his one-room cell at Zoo Atlanta prior to the building of the new habitat, photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta

Fig. 8. Willie B on his first day in the new Ford African Rain Forest at Zoo Atlanta, Georgia, 1988, photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta

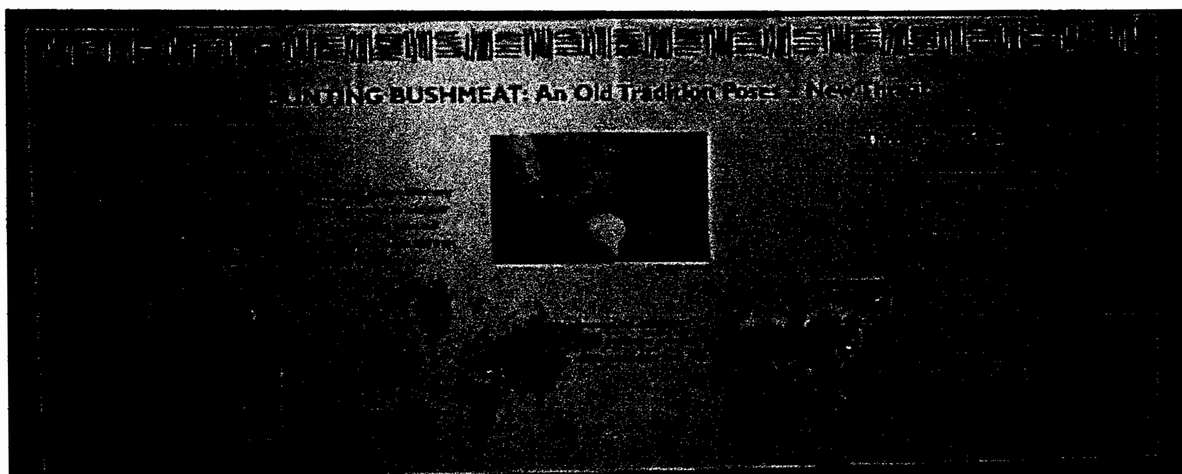

Fig. 9. Example of an exhibition sign at Zoo Atlanta

Fig. 10. Sculpture of Willie B in the memorial garden, Zoo Atlanta

Fig. 11. Entryway, called "the baggage room," Ellis Island, New York, NY

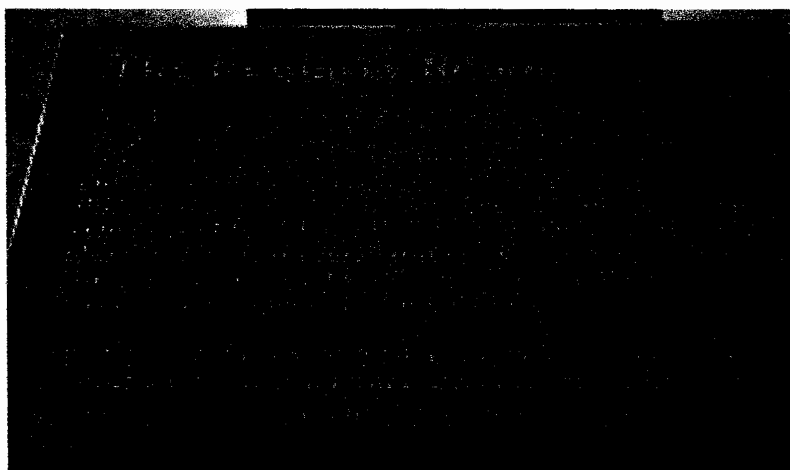

Fig. 12. Example of an exhibition label at Ellis Island

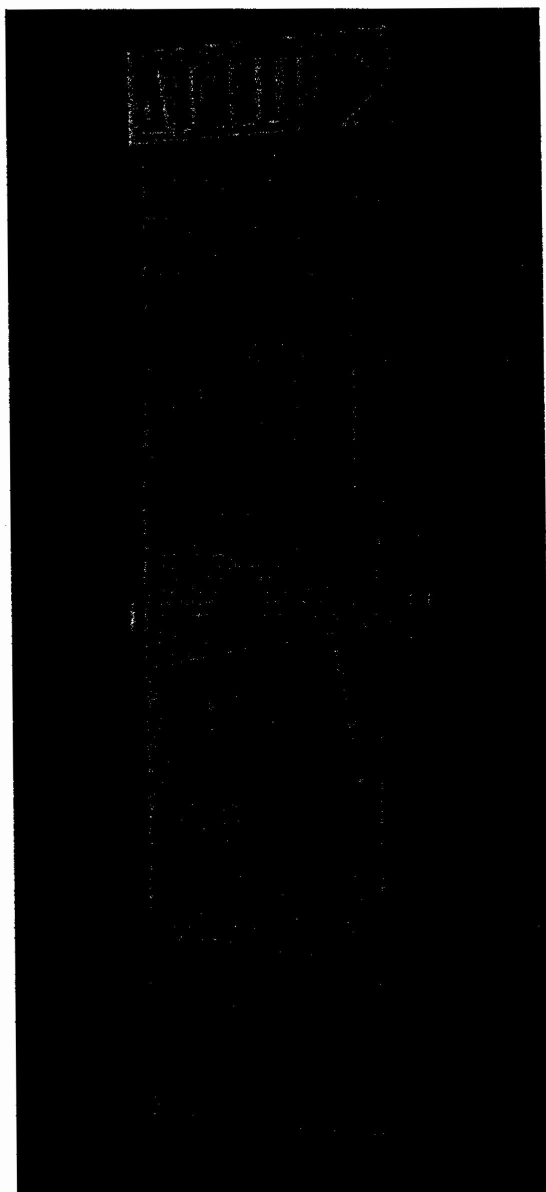

Fig. 13. Sign directing visitors to the American Family Immigration History Center at Ellis Island

Fig. 14. Ruby slippers, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

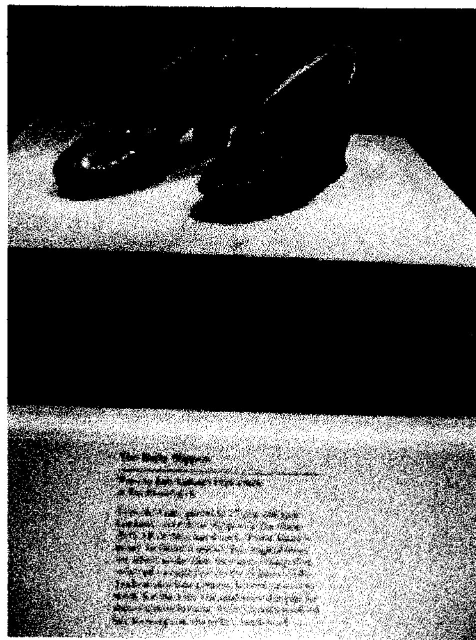

Fig. 15. Detail of ruby slippers display

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