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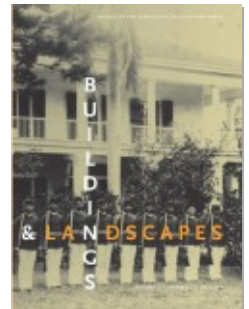
Heeding the Landscape's Usable Past: Public History in the Service of a Working Waterfront

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Heeding the Landscape's Usable Past

Public History in the Service of a Working Waterfront

On Wednesday, May 15, 1963, the Honorable John Bell Williams (D-Miss.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Transportation and Aeronautics of the U. S. House of Representatives' Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, commenced hearings on H.R. 4646. The bill had been introduced several weeks before by Representative Edward Hutchinson (R-Mich.) and called for the abandonment of approximately 1,900 feet of a federally maintained navigable waterway in Benton Harbor, a Lake Michigan port city roughly ninety miles east of Chicago.¹

Hutchinson brought Don C. Stewart, the city manager of Benton Harbor, to Washington, D.C., to further explain to the subcommittee how the community's economic revitalization would be served by abandoning a waterway maintained by the federal government since 1876. Stewart emphasized that a study undertaken between 1953 and 1955 by the prominent planning firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates recommended filling in the Ship Canal—an action that would supposedly help stem the locale's economic erosion. This proposal was also supported by the Whirlpool Corporation, the appliance maker that maintained manufacturing facilities in both Benton Harbor and its "twin" sister city of St. Joseph, situated on the south bank of the St. Joseph River.²

Representative Hutchinson acknowledged that in May 1958 when the subcommittee held hearings on a similar bill introduced by his predecessor, opposition arose to the plan to abandon the waterway. Now, the community was "united on the project." Desirous of further assurance, Representative Williams asked Stewart about

those who opposed the abandonment of the Ship Canal. The city manager reiterated there had been no "organized objection" to the proposal, but the Mississippian chose to question him further:

MR. WILLIAMS: You indicate that there may be opposition. Where would this opposition stem from?

MR. STEWART: It would be isolated and individual in nature, Mr. Chairman.

MR. WILLIAMS: What would be the basis of it?

MR. STEWART: Primarily sentimentality on the basis that we are and have been in years past, in the history of the community, a port city and that this is conceivably a potential port facility and they just out of sentiment would hate to see it abandoned.

MR. WILLIAMS: You know of no economic opposition to it?

MR. STEWART: Absolutely none representing any marine use or anyone currently using navigable waters.³

The exchange between Representative Williams and City Manager Stewart suggested that by the early 1960s elected officials and policy makers no longer saw the waterfront as vital to the economic and social vitality of Great Lakes cities and towns. Sentimentalists could look back on the days when the Ship Canal was bustling with activity and "hate to see it abandoned," but forward-looking business leaders and public officials could not. Representative Hutchinson, City Manager Stewart, and other commercial and business leaders concurred that the waterway was no longer an economic asset to the city, but in fact,

had become a liability that hindered the area's ability to attract or retain investment in industry and commerce. To some, Benton Harbor's future lay not in her marine past, but in U.S. Interstate 94, the ribbon of concrete highway now connecting Detroit and Chicago (Figure 1).⁴

The purpose of this essay is neither to trace the history of Benton Harbor's and St. Joseph's rise and fall as industrial ports nor the political and economic battles that have ensued in an attempt to rescue the former from crumbling under the weight of holding the unenviable distinction of being one of the most impoverished and racially segregated cities on the Great Lakes. The debate that took place in the 1950s regarding the future of Benton Harbor's maritime landscape and infrastructure is presented here primarily as a vehicle to raise the larger issue or question of the function of public history scholarship and the contribution it might make in fostering historic preservation literacy and history's wider role in planning initiatives effecting the sustainability of a working waterfront. In short, it explores this proposition: can public history research and interpretation be used to help residents of places that are impoverished, environmentally compromised, or facing economic transition, develop

workable strategies or solutions to problems relating to their buildings and landscapes?

The following discussion is a response to the challenge put forward by Dolores Hayden in *The Power of Place*, where she showed how public history students and scholars affiliated with the University of California at Los Angeles worked in collaboration with community groups to cull the past from Los Angeles's urban landscape. Together, they historically resuscitated or identified places where people from all walks of life, including those whose contributions to the community had long been unacknowledged or were now invisible, could come together, join in dialogue, and address collective problems through past perspectives that were more thoroughly animated in site-centered contexts. More recently, yet equally germane to these deliberations, Cathy Stanton considered the role of public history in revitalizing economically and socially distressed communities. She concluded that industrial cities like Lowell, Massachusetts, whose economic and social decline began roughly fifty years before Benton Harbor's, cannot rely on the National Park Service, the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, or any combination of publicly or privately funded educational and cultural

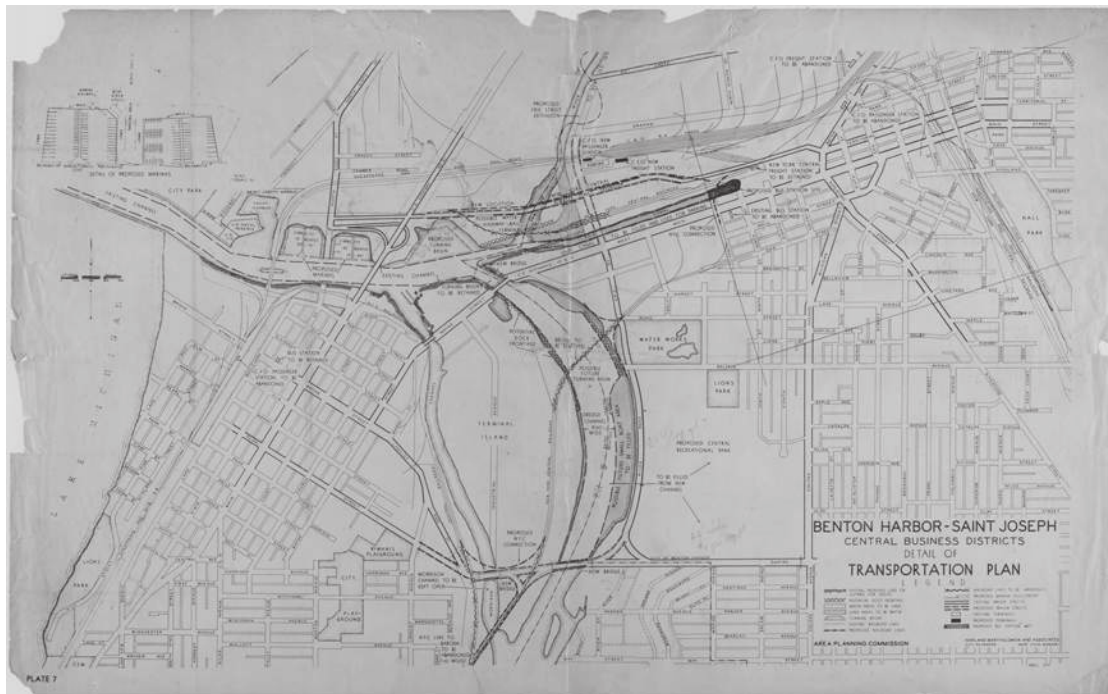


Figure 1. Harland Bartholomew and Associates Transportation Plan for Benton Harbor-Saint Joseph (April 1954). From 1953 to 1955, Harland Bartholomew and Associates prepared a Comprehensive Area Plan for these Lake Michigan "Twin Cities." Along with advocating the filling in of the Benton Harbor Canal, the plan prioritized street and highway projects and the implementation of facilities for recreational boating. Only .75 percent of a proposed \$20,976,000 budget was allocated for port improvements. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.



Figure 2. Project sign explaining the Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment Corporation's utilization of portions of Jean Klock Park and proposed measures to mitigate its encroachment on the site, winter 2009. Photograph by Michael J. Chiarappa.

institutions to neatly fill the economic or social void created by the departure or decline of entire mass-employment industries such as textiles, shoes, and machine tools.⁵

The following offers an examination of work done in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph by students and faculty associated with Western Michigan University's (WMU) Public History Program in collaboration with the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center of St. Joseph (HM&CC) and a number of other governmental units and non-governmental organizations based in the Twin Cities. Assuming that educational and cultural organizations cannot reasonably be expected to "save" the economy of an industrial city, this effort has operated from the premise that public history might be able to identify historic spaces and places that constructively contribute to inclusive civic debate concerning preservation and future planning along the waterfront. If students and scholars worked together with the men and women who walked the dunes, fished the lake, swam the beaches, loaded and unloaded bulk carrying vessels, and planted and harvested lake-shore orchards and vineyards, would they learn lessons about the landscape that would give rise to sounder public policy regarding land and natural resource use patterns? When buildings and cultural landscapes are threatened by development, would the two cities be better able to respond if historically informed community dialogue had

already taken place about sites that were most important and to whom?

The Perils of Landscape Amnesia

What motivated individuals to either favor or oppose the abandonment of the Benton Harbor Ship Canal? The ability of Benton Harbor residents to know whether they should support or object to the project depended on their long-term familiarity with the working waterfront. The waterfront of 1958 or 1963 was nothing like the waterfront of thirty-five or forty years earlier when, at the tail end of the steamboat era, tourists and baskets of fruit bound for Chicago crowded docks and wharves that now stood idle and decrepit. As more and more lakeshore plants, mills, factories, foundries, and shipping terminals closed, the community's collective memory had fewer tangible reference points for assessing the cumulative role played by the Benton Harbor Ship Canal, Lake Michigan, and the working waterfront in their everyday lives. Increasingly devoid of its visual vibrancy—those interrelational dynamics of people, buildings, and boats that quintessentially define the waterfront as a movement-oriented landscape—Benton Harbor's Ship Canal fell victim to historical amnesia, a fading landscape memory of the link that literally brought Lake Michigan downtown. The onset of this frayed historical vision impaired more than the community's ability to simply appreciate the canal's role in building Benton Harbor's urban infrastructure. Modern urban and regional planning's ahistoricism, which descended on Benton Harbor and St. Joseph in the 1950s and 1960s, exacerbated this amnesia, diminishing the public relevance of the waterfront and obscuring its historic standing as the economic and ecological portal linking the twin cities to Lake Michigan, the wider Great Lakes Basin, and the world.

In the early 1960s, Whirlpool Corporation, the nationally renowned appliance maker that operated manufacturing plants on both the Benton Harbor and St. Joseph banks of the St. Joseph River, announced that the company's continued presence depended, in part, on the willingness of these municipalities to make infrastructure improvements. Forty years later, it was in a posi-

tion to demand far more of Benton Harbor than sanitary sewer hookups and new roads. With the dawning of the twenty-first century, Whirlpool became one of the most prominent supporters of the nonprofit Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment Corporation. For those following recent building patterns along Lake Michigan and its harbors, it came as little surprise that this economic development advocacy group supported proposals calling for significant changes to the Benton Harbor waterfront. But this time, the city was being asked to forfeit a portion of publicly owned lakeshore situated in historic Jean Klock Park—a site designed by Jens Jensen, one of America's pioneering landscape architects—for three holes of a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course (Figure 2).⁶ The question emerged: were residents suitably equipped to respond to a measure that potentially limited public access to Lake Michigan and imperiled the historic integrity of a park whose ecologically oriented design accommodated the prevailing dunescape and made it a forerunner of groundbreaking conservation efforts at Indiana Dunes State Park, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore?⁷

Today, it is just as difficult for Benton Harbor's residents and visitors to know how to respond to the Harbor Shores project as it was for those involved in the public debate over the abandonment of the Ship Canal in the late 1950s and early 1960s; in fact, now it might be even more difficult for lakeshore communities to envision economically diverse, environmentally sustainable options for their waterfronts. Having adapted—for more than forty years—the national pattern of promoting tourism and leisure as an economic and cultural substitute for shipping, commercial fishing, shipbuilding, and lakeshore industry, the State of Michigan has fostered historic breaches on its Great Lakes maritime landscapes and stunted working memory of a mixed-use waterfront (Figure 3).⁸

The advocacy group Friends of Jean Klock Park and the Michigan office of the national initiative, Defense of Place, supported by members of Benton Harbor's African-American community, environmentalists, and historic preservationists, spearheaded opposition to the taking of



Jean Klock Park for the Harbor Shores development plan. In October 2007, the National Park Service (NPS) rejected the proposed use of Jean Klock Park in the Harbor Shores development plan, but park preservation supporters had a short-lived celebration. Immediately following the NPS decision, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, announced her support for the Harbor Shores plan and, working with Michigan Republican Congressman Fred Upton, persuaded the NPS to change its ruling. Advocates for Jean Klock Park are now suing the NPS to stop Jean Klock Park from becoming a part of the Harbor Shores development.⁹ The episode underscores the need for a more informed historical perspective on waterfront planning in these communities. In places that are environmentally and economically compromised, can a greater understanding of the vernacular landscape empower decision making that better serves the wider public interest? How could community members better position themselves to decide if the infusion of capital into their city for the Harbor Shores project is likely to be worth the sacrifice of municipally owned Lake Michigan shoreline? What role might public history play in examining the city's waterfront—both its land-use patterns and natural resources—to shed light on these issues and help community members formulate responses not only to Harbor Shores but to other economic development

Figure 3. Mixed use of the Benton Harbor/St. Joseph waterfront, circa 1960. The Graham and Morton passenger/freight terminal sits at the lower center of this photograph—at the confluence of the Benton Harbor Canal and St. Joseph River—flanked by open storage docks and a marina/boat repair facility formerly occupied by Robinson Marine (a St. Joseph boatbuilding company). To the left of the water tower sits the nationally renowned Benton Harbor Fruit Market, now relocated closer to U.S. Interstate 94. Courtesy of the *Herald-Palladium*.

and social rehabilitation proposals that directly or indirectly promise to benefit Benton Harbor, St. Joseph, and their inhabitants?

Many well-intentioned planning studies purport to address these issues and claim to deploy the “usable past” in their thinking, but fall short in actively cultivating an audience’s working memory—which might reside in personal experience, extant buildings, photographs—to imagine and reimagine the future of their waterfronts. However, instead of disenfranchising working memory of the built environment, some public historians and students of the vernacular landscape have found common cause through it, using it to craft broadly conceived curatorial templates that might, depending on the circumstances of a community, advance varying combinations of cultural conservation, economic revitalization, historic preservation, and environmental planning.¹⁰ For many, the work of public historians is often simply explained as the handling, presentation, and interpretation of history or historic resources outside the traditional classroom setting. Typically, this sweeping characterization, somewhat reductionist in its implications, is often conditioned by passing reference to specific tasks that instrumentalize these objectives—museums, historic preservation, archival management, documentary work, cultural resource management, planning, and policy making. Although this profile is by no means inaccurate, it too frequently lacks nuance, having the effect of benignly obscuring or, more troubling, minimizing public history’s goal of fostering and empowering broader historical discourse and consciousness in society. These lofty considerations are of consequence in any number of scenarios, but for those interested in decisions influencing the fabric of a community’s built environment and cultural landscape, they vitally inform the depth of discourse and creativity surrounding the process of planning and preservation.

In the summer of 2006, as tensions rose over the future of Jean Klock Park, representatives from the HM&CC, the principal public history organization for the twin cities of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, entered into discussions with

faculty from WMU’s Public History Program regarding heightened concern for historic preservation planning in these Lake Michigan port communities and how such measures might actually contribute to the maintenance of certain longstanding commercial and recreational uses of the waterfront. This collaborative effort sought to continue advancing the prospect that public historians—those who are actively engaged in documenting buildings and landscapes, conducting oral histories on these sites, and working with local organizations to convey this information—can help facilitate a more informed and inclusive “working” framework for planning and preservation in community life.

Specifically, this collaboration aimed to develop a number of initiatives where the shoreline’s vernacular landscape—the historic fiber of the place’s distinct uses, experiences, and building patterns—would serve as a reflective, working paradigm for informed community engagement in matters relating to planning and preservation. These objectives called for an examination of how the waterfront was publicly and privately cast, a place where collective and individual memory was sited, constructed, and ultimately made operable or “working” in contemporary life; in sum, public history serving as an ingredient of place-consciousness that planner Peter Cannavo sees as essential in forming a sustainable reconciliation between historic preservation and development.¹¹

As fieldwork got underway in the fall of 2006, this collaboration was dubbed the “Working Waterfront Project” (WWP), and in short order became the formal rubric around which all the team’s efforts would be structured. Initial fieldwork (building/landscape documentation and oral history) and archival research by WMU faculty and students, and by HM&CC staff, revealed that the waterfront’s built environment was shaped, since the onset of intensive Euro-American settlement in the mid-nineteenth century, by five principal forces: (1) commerce/trade, (2) fisheries, (3) shipbuilding/boatbuilding, (4) recreation/leisure, and (5) federal oversight. While preliminary fieldwork served to identify how each of the five shaped the landscape,

it also, as a form of civic engagement, spurred community discussion of past and present uses of St. Joseph's and Benton Harbor's waterfronts and elicited speculation on future uses. After the WWP presented these findings at a community meeting in December 2006, it became increasingly clear that the project's fieldwork was exceeding its primary function as a documentation exercise, and was, in the community interactions it forged and the heightened visibility it brought to the maritime landscape, acting as a form of public scholarship in its own right.

Earlier collaborations between WMU's Public History Program and HM&CC provided glimpses of how fieldwork exchanges could translate landscape documentation into public art and exhibition formats capable of sustaining dialogue on some of the most pressing historic preservation and cultural conservation issues confronting the Twin Cities. One of these projects proposed design ideas for public art that would express historic land-use patterns that consumed St. Joseph's Lake Michigan shoreline and its area bordering the St. Joseph River. This plan was to be implemented at a former lake-front industrial site and it included appropriate dune restoration measures. More recently, both institutions collaborated in documenting the agricultural landscape of southwest Michigan's regionally renowned Fruit Belt, producing an award-winning exhibit and World Wide Web site that dramatized the challenges of farmland preservation along the Lake Michigan shoreline and led the *New York Times* to comment nationally on this landscape's high-stakes role in cultural conservation.¹² Equipped with insight from these earlier projects, as well as a first phase of fieldwork findings, the WWP began conceptualizing a museum exhibit and a series of wayside markers that would not simply provide the history of extant and nonextant sites on the waterfront, but would challenge audiences to respond to changes that have consumed this landscape. Driven by fieldwork, particularly the exchanges and encounters it precipitated, this participatory framework needed to be keyed to working memory—the active agent of discursive or response-oriented public history presentation.¹³



To move in this direction, the WWP conducted a year of focused fieldwork and found working memory—remembrance located in each of the Twin Cities' five principal components of its maritime landscape—triangulated in the waterfront's historic representation (both in visual and written forms), in the extant built environment, and in an individual's personal and collective experience of the landscape and its depictions. As Max Page reveals in his analysis of Manhattan, remembrance's configurations assume paramount importance when transformation of the landscape is heavily influenced by history being publicly brokered through the media, cultural institutions, and political ideology. Most germane to public history's reckoning of working memory of the built environment is Page's statement: "Memory is built into the physical landscape and individual encounters with buildings, natural sites, and whole regions. Landscape and memory are codependent; memories are literally impossible without physical landscapes to store and serve as touchstones for the work of recollection."¹⁴ This triad of memory's moorings figures in the constant mapping and remapping of waterfront experience across time and space. Unraveling these mappings—delineating the contours of landscape memory

Figure 4. U.S. Lighthouse Service Depot (built 1893), St. Joseph, Michigan. This facility has been the defining feature of the waterfront's Federal Point section. Now housing the St. Joseph River Yacht Club, its preservation, along with the Twin Cities lighthouses and U.S. Coast Guard buildings, has become an important touchstone of the community's emerging efforts to spur greater preservation of waterfront buildings and space. Photograph by Michael J. Chiarappa.

Figure 5. Late nineteenth/early twentieth-century cribwork and bulkhead construction on the channel clearing South Pier at the confluence of the St. Joseph River and Lake Michigan. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.



and what they imply—was the first step in placing public history in the service of a working waterfront.¹⁵

The Contours and Work of Landscape Memory

Observations of specific waterfront sites at the confluence of the St. Joseph River and Lake Michigan are visually dramatized by their placement amid towering bluffs that give way to both flat and undulating dunescapes. Given the sublime power of these sites, it comes as little surprise that these venues—where the Upper Midwest’s river systems feed the open water of the Great Lakes—figured prominently in the newly formed U.S. federal government’s plans to exercise political and economic dominion over the frontier. Today, the channel clearing piers (built and maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), the U.S. Coast Guard Station, and the former U.S. Lighthouse Service Depot (Figure 4) that occupy the prominent nexus linking Lake Michigan and the St. Joseph River stand as the most tangible, and certainly the most enduring, symbols of the federal government’s interest in fostering the development of this maritime community. Perhaps due to their enduring presence—their constancy in the lives of generations of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor residents—

these waterfront landmarks engender their share of nostalgia and community ownership, making them major touchstones of one’s personal and collective identity in the Twin Cities. But those with a stake in the use, planning, and preservation of this waterfront, or others similar to it, benefit from coupling this sentiment with an informed perspective of what these architectural and engineering measures represent in terms of federal infrastructure designed to serve the interests of national, regional, and local development. Historically, federal mandates that inundate waterfronts with government architecture and engineering measures are as much about instilling confidence through the veil of government’s guiding hand as they are the desire to provide basic tools for the movement of people and commodities. Contrary to some of America’s most enduring myths, Theodore Karamanski notes that budding lakeshore communities “appealed to the federal government for technical and financial support” in a “manner that would embarrass today’s proponents of frontier self-sufficiency, the would-be ports of the lakes, beginning as a few forlorn voices in the 1820s, and swelling to a chorus in the 1840s, called for Congress to build their harbors.”¹⁶

The area that would ultimately emerge as St. Joseph’s and Benton Harbor’s modern working waterfront was intimately tied to these developments, and federal efforts to map and plan its future reverted to broader strategic planning for economic expansion and defense not only of the Great Lakes Basin but of territory beyond the Mississippi River. To act on this topographic vision, government-sponsored dredging, bulkheading, and architecture imprinted the landscape with federal authority (Figure 5). But on waterfronts like those of the Twin Cities, memory of a constitutionally mandated built environment projected the mutual fate of an expansive federal geography and the ambitions of a local community. This inherently civic enterprise calls on public history to serve as an effective agent in the maintenance, reconfiguration, or rejuvenation of a sustainable, contemporary Great Lakes port. This is a matter of making a landscape’s past use patterns relevant amidst a mix of economic, environmental, and social concerns, and, given the circumstances

in play in the Twin Cities, rests on an accessible reckoning of the federal government's longtime presence, planning, and improvements along the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor waterfront.

Of all sections of the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor waterfront, the area built and occupied by the federal government, once known as "Federal Point," has the longest continuous modern use. Starting in the 1820s and 1830s with the installation and expansion of channel straightening and channel clearing piers that extended into Lake Michigan, whose scale required the construction of buildings to house workers and supporting services, this site has contained, or staged, every major federal intervention within the Twin Cities littoral environment and some extending well beyond it. Following the Civil War, the site was constantly augmented by architectural and engineering improvements. Most conspicuous was the building of a Chandler-Style U.S. Life Saving Service Station in 1877 and a U.S. Lighthouse Service Depot in 1893, while, by 1907, the channel-clearing North Pier gained

Outer (Front) and Inner (Rear) Range Lights to facilitate navigation into the Twin Cities' ports.¹⁷ Paralleling these developments, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assumed greater responsibility for improving the river and harbor by extending each of the port's North and South Piers and reinforcing their revetments, building a ship's turning basin where the Paw Paw River enters the St. Joseph River, and, perhaps of greatest significance, enlarging the Benton Harbor Ship Canal and constantly dredging it to a sufficiently navigable depth. Business interests exerted considerable political pressure to gain these federal concessions, while each government agency involved in harbor improvements reinforced its constitutionally sanctioned role by issuing detailed written and pictorial reports describing its contributions to the waterfront. Rather than seeing federal involvement in the Twin Cities waterfront as external interloping, the ongoing relationship—one dating to before Michigan's statehood—blurred the lines of memory and made the presence of government agencies

Figure 6. St. Joseph's U.S. Life Saving Service crew with family members in front of the Chandler-Style Station, circa 1890s. Courtesy of the Berrien County Historical Association.



Figure 7. Sail and steam power moved commodities and passengers along the Benton Harbor Canal during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.



synonymous with the economic and social health of the community. Photographs of people fishing off of federally constructed piers and of U.S. Life Saving Servicemen and their families (many of whom were celebrated for being from the area) in front of boathouses and living quarters (Figure 6), to say nothing of the community's century-long fascination with visiting and photographing the work and site of the U.S. Coast Guard, speaks powerfully of the central government's historically deep synthesis in the locale's landscape memory.¹⁸

Indeed, popular memory, as evidenced in a 1924 St. Joseph Chamber of Commerce-sponsored account, sometimes went to great pains to acknowledge the community's reliance on federal intervention by stating that "Lake traffic could not have been developed so extensively from this harbor without consequent harbor improvement." Such recollections historically charged the outlook of residents and visitors who seized the opportunity to gaze upon a "revetment and piers . . . built in crib fashion of huge, squared timbers

and the interior anchored with great rocks" that were "being rebuilt of reinforced concrete as the original timbers were beginning to crumble with age and the constant pounding of the waves."¹⁹

Large-scale shipping's vast consumption of the Twin Cities waterfront space boldly reciprocated the federal government's civic landscape. Locked into a commercial orbit largely controlled by Chicago, the Twin Cities shipping traffic and shipping facilities bore the marks of a smaller version of the cross-lake metropolis. By the 1880s and 1890s, photographic portrayals of the waterfront's bulk carrying enterprises dominate each community's visual memory. Images show schooners (Figure 7), particularly the popular scow schooner design, lining docks where they deposited or took on lumber, cereal crops, and, until the later 1920s, prized pomological fare from the "Fruit Belt" flanking the Twin Cities eastern borders.

The waterfront's appearance took on monumental proportions as imposing steam-powered vessels carrying bulk cargo and passengers

slowly made their way into port and took their place alongside warehouses, lumber mills, grain elevators, passenger terminals, and sprawling storage yards. The activity of these sites, whether framed by their abutting rail sidings leading to inland locations or by waterborne connections to locations as far away as Buffalo or as near as Chicago, created what Barrie Trinder describes as a “landscape of busy-ness” whose sublime architectural and technological trappings streamlined the waterfront’s movements and emboldened one’s remembrance of it. Packet lines between the Twin Cities and Chicago, such as the Benton Harbor–based Graham and Morton Line, so regularized the commercial nexus between the locales that when naming of the newly formed City of St. Joseph was deliberated prior to its formal incorporation in 1892, certain interests advocated the moniker, “East Chicago.”²⁰

Near the turn of the twentieth century, schooners were still bringing timber into the Twin Cities, but as the area’s lumber industry faded, along with the age of sail, self-unloading steamers became the most commonly sighted bulk carrier in port with their cargoes of coal, lime, iron, and sand (Figures 8a and 8b). To the extent it was the arrival of these vessels in port that made people flock to the docks—a sensation that older residents in the Twin Cities still contend is the key to maintaining interest in a working waterfront—it “was the unification of the traffic in fruit to Chicago and Milwaukee markets with the excursion trade out of the two cities” that gave St. Joseph and Benton Harbor its distinctive character as a maritime center. Beginning in the 1870s, the Graham and Morton Line’s fixed routes, which linked the Twin Cities directly to Chicago and Milwaukee, provided westbound freight service for fruit and eastbound passage for excursionists. This arrangement made Benton Harbor one of the nation’s leading fruit markets during the 1920s and 1930s, and the greater St. Joseph/Benton Harbor area an extraordinarily popular vacation destination. Able to capitalize on the bounty of improved fruit cultivation and society’s rising devotion to resort-based leisure activity, Graham and Morton secured a “terminal at the foot of Wabash Avenue . . . widely considered the best in Chicago,” one “with immediate proximity to the



produce market but also to the central business district”²¹ (Figure 9).

The Graham and Morton Line’s profitable integration of fruit and passenger traffic translated into throngs of people at numerous waterfront sites throughout the Twin Cities, such as newly built hotels, amusement parks, bathing beaches, and, for those who wished to participate in agricultural tourism, visits to fruit farms lining the St. Joseph River. Successful trade in produce and passengers invited competition from a number of other shipping lines, most notably the Detroit and Cleveland Navigation Company, which sought to exploit the Twin Cities’ rising tourist economy by obtaining two waterfront-abutting hotels—the Whitcomb Hotel on St. Joseph’s towering bluffs and the sprawling

Figures 8a and 8b. A self-unloading bulk carrier deposits coal at Terminal Materials Corporation, circa 1950s. Figure 8a courtesy of the *Herald-Palladium*. Since the early twentieth century, the versatility of self-unloading bulk carriers has enabled the Twin Cities to maintain a foothold as an important regional transshipment center for coal, lime, sand, and stone at its Central Docks and Dock 63 facilities. Figure 8b photograph by Michael J. Chiarappa.



Figure 9. The Graham and Morton Line's Chicago Dock at the foot of Wabash Avenue, 1908. While proclaiming the line's east-west connections, this building speaks more powerfully of the placement of the Twin Cities within the economic network and rippling resource ecology of Great Lakes ports. Courtesy of the Morton House Museum.

Hotel St. Joseph (also known as Plank's Tavern) on the city's northernmost Lake Michigan beach (Figures 10a and 10b). Excursionists, along with others affected by a diversified waterfront economy, placed added demand on boat livery and boat construction in the Twin Cities. Vessel building sites, principally those that produced smaller craft intended for pleasure use such as the river excursion boat *May Graham*, relied on water access and were an important ingredient of this maritime landscape until the 1930s, enjoying a brief rejuvenation during World War II but transitioning to boat repair and storage in the later twentieth century (Figure 11). The Twin Cities' connections to Chicagoans with disposable income encouraged their boat builders to construct high quality pleasure craft, a patronage network that spread well beyond south-

west Michigan and led to the St. Joseph-based Truscott Boat Company being selected to build the gondolas that quietly traversed the lagoons at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.²²

For J. Stanley Morton, whose Graham and Morton Line could, at one point, claim to be the most influential economic operation in St. Joseph/Benton Harbor, nothing was left to chance in how the image and memory of his enterprise transformed the waterfront into a multiuse maritime landscape. He assiduously documented, in various pictorial and written formats for public and private consumption, his firm's vessels and buildings, along with the wider waterfront they so heavily shaped. When he died in 1936 at the age of eighty-six, after overseeing the line since its establishment in 1873, his

Benton Harbor residence was eventually made into a historic house museum adorned with extensive visual representations of the modern Great Lakes port. Unfortunately, the nonprofit corporation that operates the museum struggles to maintain the property and make its resources relevant to the needs of local residents.²³

At the foot of Fisherman's Street on the Morrison Channel section of the St. Joseph River currently sit a collection of buildings once used by the Mollhagen and Baginske families for commercial fishing. Although commercial fishing vessels no longer sit at the docks, the site still connects people to Lake Michigan by providing moorings for both sport fishing charter boats and privately owned pleasure craft, and a building adapted for tavern use provides a social venue for collectively solidifying the mariner's or passenger's lake-bound experience. Lloyd Mollhagen undertook adaptive measures in 1976 with these aims in mind. As the first to receive a buyout from the State of Michigan in exchange for retiring his commercial fishing license—a license that, ironically, bore the official label of “Michigan Commercial Fishing License No. 1” since it was originally issued to the Mollhagen family by the Michigan Department of Conservation in the 1920s—Mollhagen wanted to do “something that would let him stay on, or near, the water he loved.” Utilizing the past to plan his future, the fourth-generation St. Joseph fisher “decided that there was an opportunity to open a waterfront facility to cater to the needs of the small boat owners and sport fishermen.” He elected to use “his commercial fishing dock and net house as a starting point.” His gillnet tug Faith, already metaphorically and symbolically charged by its name and its declared standing as “a part of the family,” would remain on site as one of memory's moorings. As the twenty-first century beckoned, the community was in no hurry to sever these historic ties to this site. Still functioning as a tavern/marina, the enterprise boldly retained the name “Mollhagen's,” and the assortment of patrons, boat owners, and general riverfront gatherers who frequently assembled at the site required little prompting to begin discussion of the fish harvesting process or the local personalities who animated it (Figure 12).²⁴

The memory trail charted by the Twin Cities fisheries landscape is emblematic of how remembrance remains in play for those with a stake in the waterfront, and what public historians might draw from the built environment—occupationally, environmentally, ethnically—to channel such historical perspective in the direction of planning and preservation. Commercial fishing was underway in St. Joseph by the late 1850s, spurred by the arrival of fishers from the Milwaukee area. The occupation quickly became entrenched in the community, and by the 1880s established itself as one of Lake Michigan's principal fishing centers, a position it retained through World War II. Proximity to Chicago facilitated the transshipment of St. Joseph's fish products and accelerated investment in the industry's infrastructure. The city exhibited an array of fish processing buildings and fish docks, and, perhaps more telling of its good fortune in the fish trade, moved aggressively to adopt the latest vessel and fish harvesting technology. In an era when many Great Lakes fishers used modest Mackinaw boats



Figures 10a and 10b. The Whitcomb Hotel (built 1927) and the Hotel St. Joseph (built 1888–89). Prominently sited on the bluff overlooking the area where Lake Michigan and the St. Joseph River meet, the Whitcomb Hotel's preservation, and subsequent adaptive reuse as a retirement home, provides a symbolic link to earlier, vacation-oriented, lakeshore hotels such as the Hotel St. Joseph. Figure 10a photograph by Michael J. Chiarappa. Figure 10b courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

Figure 11. Dachel-Carter Shipyard, on the Benton Harbor Canal, Benton Harbor, Michigan, July 1944. This image was one of many taken of the Twin Cities waterfront by aerial photographer Adolph Hann. The grip of his photography on the community's collective memory of the waterfront is only beginning to be appreciated. In an appeal to working memory, the *Herald Press* of St. Joseph ran this photograph on May 10, 1965, with the caption: "Shipyards are quiet now or being used for other purposes. But the hammers could ring again if needed." Courtesy of the *Herald-Palladium*.



Figure 12. Mollhagen's fishery, St. Joseph, Michigan, 1998. Although Lloyd Mollhagen had relinquished ownership of his operation by the late 1990s, its adaptive reuse as a sport fishing marina still bore the name "Mollhagen's" and its new users commented that stories of the site's earlier commercial fishing era still infused daily activities at the locale. Photograph by Michael J. Chiarappa.

for gillnetting lake trout and whitefish, the prosperity of St. Joseph's fisheries enabled them to embrace steam-powered fish tugs more rapidly than many others in their occupation; in 1885, the city and its surrounding communities led all Lake Michigan ports with ten fishing steamers. Through these developments, landscape memory of commercial fisheries became tethered to technology's capacity to empower, and yet at times humble, the occupation's working relationship with Lake Michigan. Photographic documentation took notice of St. Joseph fishers being among the first to give fish tugs their unique regional appearance through "turtlebacking," a process of totally enclosing the vessel's topside deck to ease exposure to the lake's arduous weather conditions. Because the Twin Cities fishing grounds were so far offshore, gillnetting was the dominant harvesting technology, making reel yards—where gill nets were cleaned, dried, and repaired on large spool-like structures—a place-defining feature worthy of extensive photographic memorialization (Figure 13). Other fishers enshrined their waterfront presence with a glint of technological chauvinism. The Mollhagen family branded their landscape location by touting, in a variety of visual formats, their construction of one of Lake Michigan's first steel fish tugs. Copious visual presentation, including

the tug's placement on the family's business stationery, left little room, even when one was not standing on the dock, to forget how the occupation technologically and architecturally straddled the terrestrial/aquatic environment.²⁵

Human and financial disaster played a prominent role in making memory a bulwark of commercial fishing's occupational endurance, while, for the wider St. Joseph/Benton Harbor community, it imbued remembrance of the fisheries landscape with a heroic aura. U.S. Fish Commission officials commented that few, if any, Great Lakes fishing communities sustained St. Joseph's share of human loss during the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly from 1860 to 1885 when twenty-seven of its fishers perished on Lake Michigan during severe storms. Added to this burden was the debilitating effect of property loss or damages for those who survived. In 2007, lifelong St. Joseph resident Robert Grimm was still vividly recalling these events: "In 1870 my grandfather came here from Milwaukee. He had been a fisherman over there, and got blown over here in a storm, and liked the area so he built up a fishing industry here and he had six or seven boats. They were sailboats in those days. And there was a big storm and he lost five or six of them and the crew. Yeah, they immigrated from Germany to Milwaukee, but then a lot of the immigrants came over here." As the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor fishery stood on the threshold of elimination due to pollution and changes in state fishery policy in the mid-1970s, memory resurrected, in the context of these circumstances, the occupation's need for versatility and the sometimes unintended consequences of such actions. When the March 1975 issue of *The Fisherman* (the principal news organ of Great Lakes commercial fishing) recollected how, in September 1923, the fish tug Forelle sank while supplementing its income by transporting fruit from Benton Harbor to Milwaukee, the Twin Cities were awash with memories of the occupation's fleeting fortunes.²⁶

Ethnic solidarity culturally reinforced the economic success of St. Joseph's commercial fisheries. In the late nineteenth century, nine-tenths of its commercial fishers were of German ancestry, a demographic profile that abated very little

over the course of the twentieth century. While they coped with success and tragedy, St. Joseph's German-American fishers, along with the same ethnic constituencies in Milwaukee and Chicago, contributed to changing the complexion of Lake Michigan's fisheries by introducing to the region's diet their culturally inherited preference for smoked fish. Initially, lake whitefish and lake trout were the principal staples in each community's smokehouses, but in the 1880s, Lake Michigan's German-American fishers began capitalizing on their by-catch of small deep-water herrings, known regionally as "chubs," whose flesh is ideally suited for smoking. Having found chubs to be an equivalent of their Old World kippers, St. Joseph's fishers helped transform the lake's deep-water herrings from incidental catch to a target species that continues to enjoy the cachet of a regional delicacy. Smokehouses, along with net sheds, reel yards, fish processing buildings, ice houses, and fish tugs, created an almost seamless connection between people and the lake's waterborne resources, while the smells, emanating from either fish being cured by burning oak, maple, or hickory or by hot tar

being applied to pound nets, etched the fishing site deeply in the community's ambient memory (Figure 14). Closely matching this sensory experience is visual memory of the fishing sites' varied placements along the waterfront, a function of commercial fishers having to compete with much more heavily capitalized commercial shipping firms and railroads for prized shoreline space. Faced with this dilemma, fishers secured waterfront locations and boat moorings wherever they could, conditions that sometimes gave their work site a crowded, incongruous appearance amidst its neighbors. Although perhaps not their preference, the fisheries' lesser need for elaborate infrastructure and larger space (compared to the Twin Cities bulk carriers) allowed them to move with greater flexibility to different waterfront locations, a pattern repeating itself consistently from the late nineteenth century through World War II, when St. Joseph's "fishing center" or "fishing village" was displaced to the city's margin to make room for a remobilized shipyard.²⁷

Commercial fishers based in Benton Harbor/St. Joseph worked waters seven to thirty miles from port, visiting these fishing grounds

Figure 13. The Baginske fishery's reel yard, St. Joseph, Michigan, circa 1940–50. Miles of gill nets were cleaned and repaired in the reel yard, often making it the most conspicuous section of a fishery's waterfront space. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.





Figure 14. R. G. Woods Pearl Button Factory, St. Joseph, Michigan, circa 1930s. Freshwater clams or mussels were harvested from the St. Joseph River and their shells were processed into pearl buttons at this factory on the waterfront in St. Joseph. Freshwater clam processing sites throughout the Midwest were legendary for the odors they produced. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

as frequently as the lake's "sudden and violent storms," or government regulation, would allow. Such intensive immersion in Lake Michigan's waters, coupled with enough observational savvy of biological conditions to ensure successful catches, meant that Twin Cities fishers brought more than fish to the docks, but were messengers of environmental conditions and ecological health. With each generation, fishers built on their traditionally acquired knowledge of the lake and harbored an important component of the community's ecological/environmental memory; when the fish tug touched the dock after a round of working Lake Michigan, the waterfront's energy as a site of environmental knowledge was released among fisher and non-

fisher alike. Environmental information flowing across the wharf served to map the fisheries' potential bounty, as well as challenges that stood to impede it. St. Joseph's and Benton Harbor's stature as a prosperous lumbering center made their commercial fishers acutely sensitive to the issue of sawdust pollution, an environmental affliction whose perils gained national attention largely through efforts of Great Lakes fishers collaborating with investigations conducted by the U.S. Fish Commission in the 1870s and 1880s. The presence of the fishing site, heightened by the early attention it received from federal observers, was a constant reminder of the lake's palpable living force, an architectural arrangement that visually cued the wider community's

substantive territorial claims to the health of lake whitefish, lake trout, and chubs.²⁸

Looking at photographs of his family's fishery buildings and fish tugs, Fred Baginske Jr., who worked with his father, his uncles, and Lloyd Mollhagen harvesting Lake Michigan's waters, narrates the site, and the location emerges as a benchmark for a variety of occupational bearings, a cognitive overlay for organizing far-flung geographic and environmental perception. Still visually vested in this occupational landscape, Baginske's observations of the waterfront prompted him to say:

When they fished lake trout, they would go quite a ways out . . . towards the middle of the lake or towards Chicago . . . just dead reckoning and of course they had their compasses checked . . . but basically it was a sounding line and a compass and a watch or clock. When they were trout fishing, they would go everyday in good weather. They would fish, when I was a kid, some winters, all winter long. Now that didn't mean they didn't get storms, there would be tree stumps that would come up half the size of the boat. And they would go in bad storms, they would go miles.²⁹

Such geographic literacy, charted from the vantage point of the fish house, shaped community insight on stock fluctuations of target species, sea lamprey predation, the biological imbalance caused by the nonindigenous alewife, and, by the late twentieth century, the deleterious effects of DDT, PCBs, and dieldrin. Lloyd Mollhagen went so far as to cast his site as a pulpit upon which to debate Michigan's perch regulations in the early 1970s.³⁰ If the State of Michigan decided to reopen commercial fishing on grounds Twin Cities fishers call home, or if sites adapted to sport fishing continue to fill this void and maintain the connection, the community's waterfront planning can take measure of John Hays's observation: "It is as much of a calamity to lose the fishermen as it is to lose the fish. Fishing communities around the world have harbored the ways of the sea in themselves, a knowledge not soon acquired again after it, and they, have been abandoned."³¹

Public history that seeks to abet the planning and preservation of a diverse working water-

front—both the physical infrastructure and the activity it stages—can better engage communities such as St. Joseph/Benton Harbor by identifying instances, both subtle and overt, where the "presence of the past" goes from one memory mode or location to another and gets actively reckoned in landscape use.³² Jens Jensen's design for Jean Klock Park was revolutionary because of its respect for the dunescape's historical ecology, but the momentum behind it stemmed largely from the dune preservation movement's use of public history and public culture to substantiate an environmental ethic committed to sense of place, not just nature in the abstract (Figure 15). Specifically, Jensen's Prairie Club of Chicago began hosting historically based dramatic productions at Indiana Dunes in the 1910s, culminating in the "Historical Pageant and Masque of the Sand Dunes in Indiana," also known as "The Great Dunes Pageant," on Memorial Day 1917.³³ As J. Richard Engel notes, the ritual power of this event, which gained national attention, put the preservation of Lake Michigan's dunescapes into the realm of civic religion. By having an outdoor drama depicting elements of the Native American, French, Spanish, British, and American experience on Lake Michigan's shore, "the pageant created a political constituency for the preservation of the Dunes" and "helped reconnect those present with . . . human beings across the generations, which it was the purpose of the park to serve."³⁴

Organizations and activities that today would pass as public history weighed in during the years preceding and following this epic historical drama, and the Chicago Historical Society played a prominent role in its production, an unprecedented outdoor event staged in a dunescape feature known as a "blowout." Fresh from



Figure 15. Dedication of Jean Klock Park on Lake Michigan in Benton Harbor, Michigan, June 14, 1917. Designed by Jens Jensen, the park's dedication ceremony took place only a month and a half after "The Great Dunes Pageant" at Indiana Dunes. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.



Figure 16. W. A. Preston Planing Mill and Lumber Yard, St. Joseph, Michigan, circa 1892–1902. Throughout the United States, many lumber mills located on water readily accommodated shipbuilding and ship repair operations, and this site was no exception, as it gradually gave way to the Truscott Boat Company. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

the pageant, where “history was presented as the key to the meaning of both the surrounding and natural environment and the society’s identity,” Jensen carried into the Jean Klock Park project the event’s dramatically expressive “aim of holding up for the citizens of the Chicago region a mythic vision of their distinctive landscape and history, the dream of a regional community, part urban, part rural, part wild, characterized by reciprocity between society and nature.”³⁵ His quest to put history and culture to work in ecologically oriented design of the dunescape found support from the mythological tone of Earl Reed’s etchings of the dunes and his folkloristically inspired literary depictions of characters that inhabited

them, as well as in the idealized paintings of Frank V. Dudley whose luminescent quality embodied Progressive and Populist optimism in the dunes as the place where “north, south, east, and west meet geologically, botanically, zoologically, historically, socially, industrially, commercially.”³⁶ Images of the dunescape produced by local and regional artists were even featured on the posters produced during the 1920s by the South Bend and South Shore Railroad in order to boost ridership and encourage real estate investment in its service area.³⁷

By the latter twentieth century, the Twin Cities’ usable past exerted influence on the waterfront in response to the community’s changing

economy. In the 1960s, the State of Michigan began encouraging many of its port communities to veer from their mixed-use waterfronts to arrangements more solely tailored to a rising recreational economy. State programs fostered marina development, recreational boating, and sport fishing, a policy direction that, when combined with the effects of urban renewal, began to dramatically remake the complexion of Lake Michigan waterfronts and erase the physical past. But memory continued to exert its pull, often providing insight on how remembrance of the waterfront was being availed to support certain agendas while ignoring others, much to the detriment of a balanced discourse on the future of the Twin Cities port facilities. During the 1960s/1970s recreational surge, People's State Bank in St. Joseph saw memory as useful to meet these ends, utilizing an historic image of the community's waterfront-supporting lumber/millwork trade to encourage new uses of the maritime landscape. Under a late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century image of the W. A. Preston Planing Mill and Lumber Yard (Figure 16), the advertisement proclaimed:

TIMES HAVE CHANGED !

SINCE MORRISON CHANNEL
AT WAYNE STREET BRIDGE
LOOKED LIKE THIS !

The foregoing scene depicts another by-gone era, when shipping and commercial fishing were at their peaks. Today, most shipping is handled by truck or rail and fishing is almost completely limited to private small craft. If you've got that "dreamboat" picked out, finance it at your "Good Neighbor Bank" in St. Joseph.³⁸

As the twenty-first century unfolded, memory of the waterfront was being actively employed by Twin Cities residents interested in preserving the legacy of St. Joseph's Silver Beach Amusement Park, a place where visitation ranged from being a regular to annual event, and for others, a rite of passage if you met your future spouse on the dance floor of the Shadowland Pavilion.³⁹ But on other fronts, memory and landscape documen-

tation showed that much was to be gained by using public history to help the community work through some pressing decisions that needed to be made on the waterfront's past, present, and future. The possibilities of this prospect emerged when the WWP conducted an oral history interview with Peter Berghoff, president of Dock 63 in St. Joseph:

I'm half from one side of the lake and half from the other. My family is Chicago-based, and my parents came over here when we were children. But I also had a grip on my family's business and I ended up down here. And I just fell in love with the place . . . I liked the dock, [and] the ships.⁴⁰

Curious about how the Dock 63 area was used in the past, he took it upon himself to do some local history research when he began managing the site. He recalled how he went to the HM&CC and "pulled a lot of files. And there had been a concrete plant here probably since the turn of the century. There was quite a variety of things on the waterfront. But this dock has handled everything."⁴¹ Berghoff further reflected on the waterfront changes he observed in his lifetime noting that "marinas and the recreational aspect of it, fishing—sport fishing, not commercial fishing, is what drives the port from the eyes of the community." Reflecting on his own work, Berghoff felt that the bulk carrier business had become invisible to many residents:

They kind of ignore what we do, because you know, oh, it's just rock. What's rock? Well, rock is what you're driving on. The docks still play a very important role, but it's not looked upon with commercialized or industrialized eyes, it's looked upon through residential eyes . . . So people don't realize how a facility like this touches their lives in so many ways . . . if you drive on it, work in it, play on it . . . I'd say that 90%, or 100%, of the buildings in this community have been touched by this dock or the docks in this port in some way, shape, or form.⁴²

Public History and Reimagining an Urban Waterfront

The preceding discussion frames the issues and process for public history's use, as noted by

Dolores Hayden and others, in revealing “the power of place” and giving voice to the individuals and groups from the past and present who have made their mark upon the landscape—even if the landscape is now a parking lot or similar site seemingly devoid of traces from the past.⁴³ Such a prospect considers whether public history research and presentations can assist community members to identify and assess a range of options for collective response to economic and social change, and help reimagine a landscape shaped by new, or simply different, environmental, economic, and social assumptions and priorities. Will those who live, work, and visit St. Joseph and Benton Harbor and their environs be better equipped to chart a course of response to the redevelopment of their waterfront if they understand how it and the lakeshore’s natural resources, such as lumber and fish, were utilized in the past? Perhaps if the residents of the Twin Cities, as well as those of other cities in the watershed area, more vividly see their lives shaped by the interrelated forces of Lake Michigan, the St. Joseph River, the dunes, the surrounding fields and forests, and the historic built environment, they might be able to respond more cogently when their natural and cultural landscapes are ecologically threatened or saddled with short-sighted economic development.

Since 2000, WMU Public History faculty has been working with the St. Joseph–based HM&CC, formerly known as the Fort Miami Heritage Society. This organization is in the process of reinventing itself, evolving from a traditional local historical society and museum into an active agent in public education and the formation of policy regarding historical and cultural resources. During the past eight years, a series of three projects were jointly undertaken by the HM&CC and WMU’s Public History Program in order to help the membership and the larger community better envision the role a historical organization can play in fostering public dialogue about what should be saved, documented, or interpreted and how it could be accomplished through the substance and analytical power of the vernacular landscape. The first of these projects resulted in a museum exhibit, “Shared Waters: Native Americans and French Newcomers on the Upper Great

Lakes.” One of the goals of the exhibit was to help the public understand the complex exchange relationship that existed between the region’s Native Americans and French newcomers, particularly the cultural landscape that emerged from these interactions. These antecedents played no small part in casting the die for Benton Harbor’s and St. Joseph’s rise as a Great Lakes urban port, a legacy that similarly defined Chicago’s future and any number of other smaller, and tremendously interdependent, Lake Michigan cities.⁴⁴

The second place-based history project WMU public historians undertook with the HM&CC staff addressed the contemporary loss of prime fruit-growing land and rural architecture in the area historically known as the Southwest Michigan Fruit Belt. Although the project examined the broad history of fruit production and processing in the area, it did so using architecture, landscape, and technology as the dominant curatorial framework, and it addressed such questions as: Who owned and managed the berry fields, orchards, and vineyards located on the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan and gathered the harvest? What was grown and where was it marketed? Why were local growers unable to compete with those in Florida or California? Will the local or slow foods movement help revive the Southwest Michigan Fruit Belt?

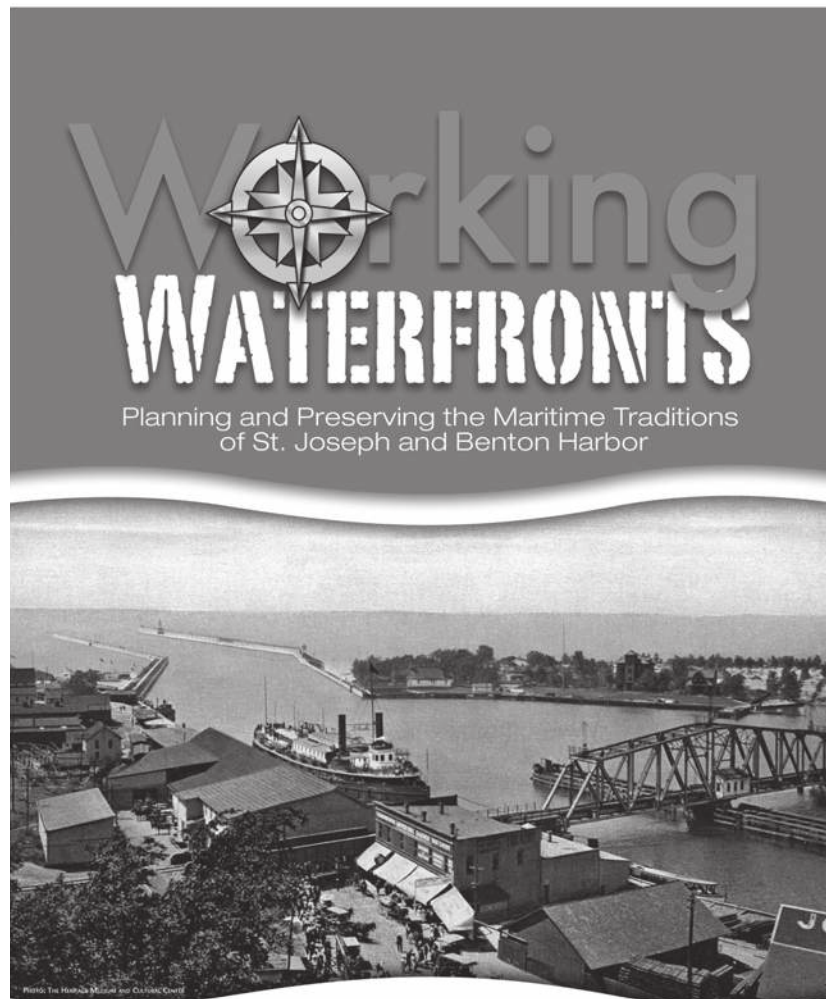
Research on the Fruit Belt project demonstrated that from the late nineteenth century until about 1930, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph thrived as industrial ports; ships bringing fruit, passengers, and other goods linked Benton Harbor and St. Joseph to the small ports up and down the lakeshore and more importantly, to the major ports of Chicago and Milwaukee. The waterfront was not only occupied by docks, wharves, and warehouses owned by shipping firms, but also by commercial fishing families that built docks and processing sheds for their operations. Boat-building took precedence over shipbuilding, although the latter did operate in sporadic fashion, its dramatic revival during the World War II boom being an example of how quickly the maritime landscape could be physically reshaped and technologically reengineered. The loss of these and other marine-related industries, in some instances any physical trace, important as

historical reference points for what is productive and problematic at the water's edge, endanger St. Joseph/Benton Harbor's standing as a multiuse working waterfront. Should these ports join others whose harbors are devoid of any signs of their industrial and commercial past? To address these and other questions, WMU's Public History Program joined forces with the HM&CC to focus on the preservation of the working waterfront—an initiative where public history would help the community find common ground that could mutually support historic preservation, cultural conservation, and economic development in the Twin Cities.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's study, *Maritime America: A Legacy at Risk*, identified the need to preserve working waterfronts, noting how commercial fishing and other maritime trades that help “preserve both character and historic facilities” have been “forced out through economic pressure caused by increased land values and demographic changes: new residents become intolerant of the reality of the ‘working waterfront’—which may be noisy, smelly, and dirty.”⁴⁵ The difficulties of determining how a community's waterfront should be utilized were acknowledged in this landmark 1988 study:

Waterfront areas are caught directly in the question of what is the public interest. Is it great public access and enjoyment—at least for the well-to-do? Is it the continued health of the maritime industries? Is there space enough for all? How is it possible to achieve a balance between public and private, amenity and reality, use for work, and use for play? And given these choices, how can the result be influenced—if a community can decide what it wants?⁴⁶

Among the suggestions offered by *Maritime America: A Legacy at Risk* was for studies of local and regional maritime culture to be undertaken in the absence of the resources needed by federal agencies such as the National Park Service. Seeing “a role . . . for academia in developing a philosophical context for the recognition and protection of maritime heritage,” the report called for innovative “planning tools” and “[n]ew processes . . . to achieve conflict resolution



and facilitate planning decisions.” In a prescient statement that anticipated problems of waterfront preservation being conspicuously debated in 2008 on a national and international level, the report concluded: “Demonstration projects revealing successful approaches to waterfront development and preservation are badly needed, as communities along the coasts, riverways and Great Lakes struggle with these common, complicated and ultimately frustrating issues.”⁴⁷

WMU public historians responded to this challenge by recommending the HM&CC design an exhibit unlike any they had previously produced—one that would posit the preservation and interpretation of the maritime landscape as a means of advancing the balanced commercial and recreational use of both St. Joseph's and Benton Harbor's waterfront (Figure 17). The main purpose of the exhibit would be to gather and report public

Figure 17. Lead panel for the “Working Waterfronts” exhibit at the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

opinion regarding the identification, documentation, preservation, and interpretation of maritime historical and cultural resources. It would help determine the extent of public awareness of and support for maritime-related preservation and planning—information of potential use to both the public and private sectors in the allocation of resources. For example, how widespread is community awareness that the City of St. Joseph has recently acquired one of two lighthouses on its waterfront from the U.S. Coast Guard and could acquire the other? Are residents and visitors willing to help supplement the public expenditures that would be necessary to maintain them? Do they expect access to the lighthouses, along with research and interpretative materials? Would such an acquisition refine or stunt the community's understanding of the federal government's longtime role on the waterfront?

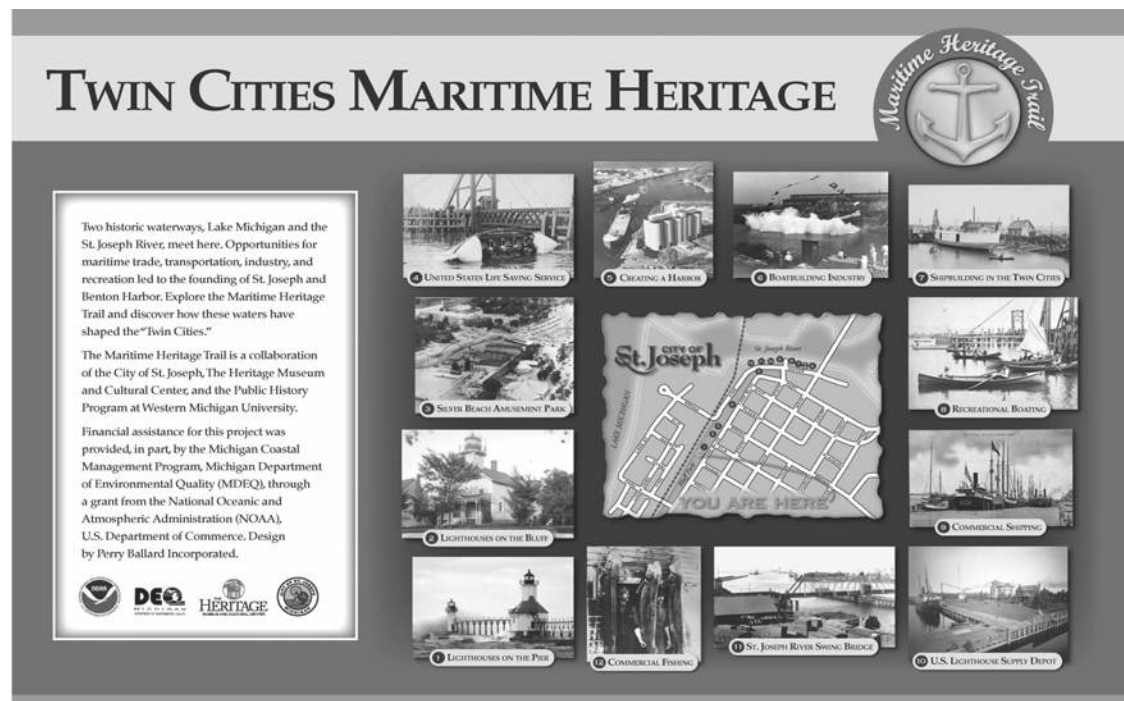
The exhibit proposal called for the presentation of key public policy questions or issues relating to the preservation of the working waterfront and how these are driven by a complex reconciliation of natural resource use, current commercial trends, maritime labor and technology, and cultural conservation. One or more low-tech devices such as traditional museum comment books

and cards, wipe boards, as well as more high-tech devices such as a video recorder and e-mail were recommended for each of the five thematic areas so visitors could enter into the dialogue and express their viewpoints as well as read and/or hear those of others.⁴⁸

The design demands of the interactive exhibit prompted the HM&CC to opt for a more traditional presentation of the locale's maritime history rather than the recommended format. The HM&CC's modification of the exhibit proposal prompted the WMU team to rethink the role and function of the proposed World Wide Web site. Initially planned as more of a supplement to the exhibit, it was reconceptualized to become the primary means of gathering public input on maritime-related planning priorities. Nearing completion, the Web site seeks to elicit public perspectives on public policy questions regarding the waterfront and its future.

One portion of the original WMU exhibit proposal that the HM&CC decided to fund called for the development of a new media presentation that would examine the Benton Harbor and St. Joseph waterfront since the late nineteenth century. Now completed, the presentation is the result of over a year of collaborative work between WMU Public

Figure 18. The anchor marker for the Twin Cities Maritime Heritage Trail. Courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.



History faculty and students, the HM&CC, and students enrolled in the animation technology program at Kalamazoo Valley Community College. Developed with a budget of \$5,500, with the use of computer animation, the viewer can move up the St. Joseph River and visit portions of the waterfront as they changed over time. Envisioned more as an aesthetic/ambient experience rather than a didactic presentation, the working waterfront “animatic” will be projected onto a large screen in the gallery toward the entrance of the exhibit.

Throughout the Working Waterfront Project, WMU public historians embraced the eco-museum concept, a museum strategy not limited to a building’s interior walls but one predicated on an array of presentational options, both in traditional gallery spaces and on the landscape, to show the vital interrelationships between a place’s ecology and its most defining historical and cultural forces. Its intent was to seek ways of helping Benton Harbor and St. Joseph residents and visitors learn how to read or decode the maritime landscape to gain insight into the process of community formation, the creation and maintenance of market economies, the impact of technological change on transportation networks, and other economic and social shifts. In 2006, the City of St. Joseph acquired a grant from the State of Michigan’s Coastal Zone Management Program to work with the HM&CC staff and WMU public historians to research, design, fabricate, and install of a series of twelve wayside markers relating to maritime history. After city officials, in consultation with HM&CC staff, selected the location and theme of each marker, WMU Public History students participating in the Summer 2007 Local History Workshop—drafted marker text and suggested images. They recommended that at least a portion of the markers be site-specific and use maps and photographs to show how a particular place had either changed or remained remarkably consistent over time. From an ethnographic perspective, the conceptualization of these markers attempts to reflect how people locate themselves in the waterfront’s material world and in its ambient, sensory dimensions, an approach that was aided immeasurably by examining extant buildings and printed materi-

als, and then integrating these sources with oral history and actual fieldwork guidance from residents who worked on the waterfront and experienced its daily rhythms or observed the setting’s transformation from afar.⁴⁹ Having used this approach to devise historical walking tours of the federal section of the Twin Cities waterfront, the WWP envisioned these markers as constructively empowering the citizenry’s voice, whether the markers prompted discussion among locals on the streets or positioned residents to be better historical arbiters or guides for those visiting their maritime landscape (Figure 18).⁵⁰

The twelve wayside markers were planned as part of a larger maritime history trail that will ultimately guide visitors around the city’s Lake Michigan and St. Joseph River waterfront and other maritime-related places and points of interest. The maritime history trail was conceived to begin and end at a centrally located place known locally as Whirlpool Field. The now vacant industrial site, currently owned by the Whirlpool Corporation, sits directly below the downtown St. Joseph bluff overlooking Lake Michigan adjacent to the city’s most popular public swimming beach.

With the approval of then Whirlpool CEO David Whitwam and the City of St. Joseph, WMU’s Public History Program developed a plan to turn the Whirlpool Field into a park that attempted to help visitors understand how the place appeared in the past, who inhabited it, and how its uses had changed over time. In short, the park’s design sought to assist the community in overcoming its urban amnesia. Taking advantage of the striking overlook from the bluff, the central feature of the park plan was a depiction or a representation of the St. Joseph River and its watershed that was to be contoured into the land itself. In this park plan, the St. Joseph River was to be presented as a unifying, not a dividing force between St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, two cities that are now sorely divided by race, income, and community infrastructure.

The proposal for Whirlpool Field also called for the partial restoration of the sand dunes. It advised against the construction of any building or landscape feature that would place a heavy maintenance demand upon the City of St. Joseph, compromise the view from the city, or

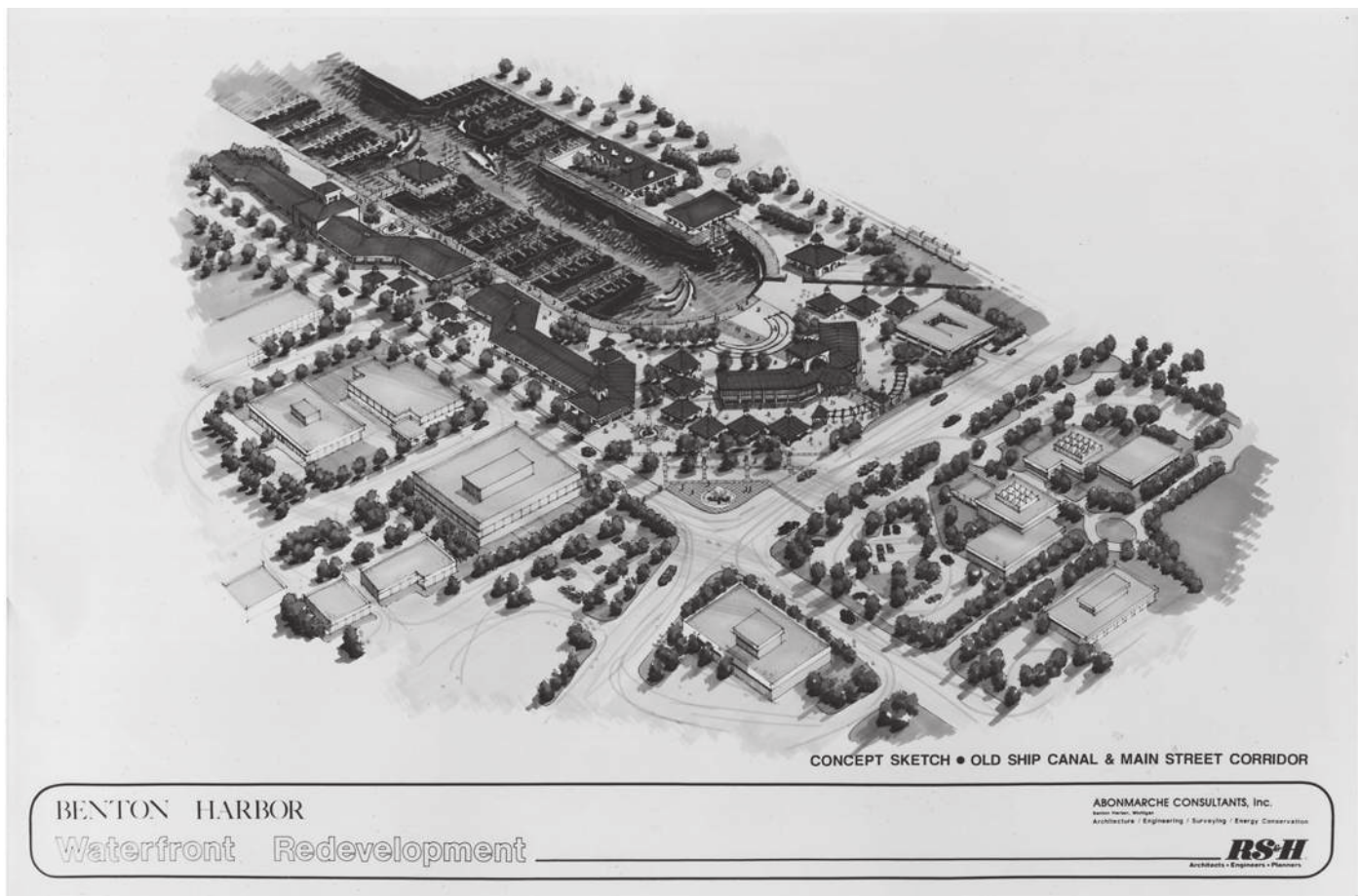


Figure 19. Benton Harbor Waterfront Redevelopment Plan, Abonmarche Consultants, Inc., 1989. Courtesy of the *Herald-Palladium*.

otherwise be incompatible with the ecosystem. Seasonal structures for public programs such as storytelling would be erected with the assistance of Native Americans and be modeled on their historic building idioms and materials, or be structures that simply conform to their culturally preferred spatial arrangements. Plantings or artistic representations of the indigenous flora and fauna of the area, especially aquatic species used for food such as wild rice, lake trout, and whitefish, were recommended. The proposal called for architecturally and environmentally sensitive seasonal concessions featuring local foods, particularly fruit products from surrounding farms. The region's boatbuilding and shipbuilding tradition would be acknowledged through the construction of a boatbuilding shed on the riverside portion of the site.

The entire Whirlpool Field proposal was researched and developed with the goal of fostering unity between the two communities and an

eye to keeping building and maintenance costs low. It was developed with respect to the site's natural beauty and historical significance as a meeting place for generations of animal species and humans. The proposal took into consideration that literally tons of sand can potentially be dumped upon the site by winter storms and the threat of wind and water damage is a constant. It was also developed to generate joint participation from other community groups and cultural organizations. For example, a nearby children's museum could utilize the park for educational programming. The sculpture proposed for the park could be considered a public extension of the private sculpture collection of the local art museum, the Krasl Museum of Art, that sits on the bluff adjacent to Whirlpool Field. The Sarrett Nature Center, a nonprofit environmental education initiative with particular interest in dune ecology, was another community group whose involvement was recommended.

In sum, the exhibit proposal, the “Great Lakes Working Waterfronts” Web site, the new media presentation, and the Whirlpool Field proposal were all planned to help residents and visitors gain a better understanding of the inextricable relation between Lake Michigan, the St. Joseph River, and the development of the Twin Cities waterfront as a regionally defined vernacular landscape. These public history efforts, which can be viewed simultaneously as presentations, formats, and processes for civically oriented community history, show how marine industries, transportation, commerce, and water-oriented leisure/recreation were the fiber that held the Great Lakes Region together. Modern St. Joseph began as a French fortification and trading post that was part of mercantilist global economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Benton Harbor linked its fortunes to Chicago and sought to position itself in a local economy and a regional economy. The waterfront’s standing as a vernacular landscape embodies economies of scale, industries based on local products and local knowledge, and the formulation of trade routes and business practices linked to environmental and cultural patterns that networked the Twin Cities regionally, nationally, and internationally. Public history of the vernacular landscape makes this legacy spatially relevant to those who animate and observe the Twin Cities waterfront, and heightens their awareness of how they might claim their stake in its future. Increasingly, these insights are emanating from collaborations between communities and a host of academic disciplines—public history, historic preservation, and environmental studies, to name but a few—that are integrating the ideas of applied scholarship, civic engagement, and the outcomes of the architect/planner’s charette to make historic buildings and landscapes more dynamic components of visioning exercises that will define the fate of urban and rural settings throughout the United States and beyond.⁵¹

Guided by the 1955 Master Plan produced by Harland Bartholomew and Associates, the City of Benton Harbor proceeded with the project to fill in the canal. In 1964, through the use of federal urban renewal funds, a road was extended

across the canal in the hopes of spurring further industrial development of the area. But in the end, neither this nor any of the other dozens of public and privately funded economic and civic renewal or revitalization projects halted the decline of the city, the state, or the region. Still casting about in Benton Harbor twenty-six years later for a planning solution to the city’s woes, representatives of Harland Bartholomew and Associates returned to the scene of their earlier efforts. They saw that the parking lots they recommended to relieve downtown traffic congestion were now abandoned and overrun with weeds and litter. And according to a press account, “what was not turned into parking lots is a smelly marsh.”⁵²

In 1989, Harland Bartholomew and Associates suggested a study to determine the cost of reopening the canal. Charles Eckenstahler, president of Abonmarche Development, embraced the idea because the canal would not be reopened to help Benton Harbor reestablish itself as a commercial port but to accommodate recreational boating (Figure 19). He envisioned yachts and cabin cruisers arriving in town bringing boaters to dine, shop, and stroll around town as they had a century earlier. Today, the likelihood of literally putting the harbor back into Benton Harbor through the reconstruction of the Ship Canal is slim. Environmental and cost restrictions are likely to impede the proposal for some time to come, although Governor Granholm recently asked Benton Harbor officials to submit a proposal that would use federal stimulus funds to reopen the canal for recreational boaters. But public history can, in substitute, put the harbor back in Benton Harbor and help it, and its twin city of St. Joseph, recover historic insight and a sense of place necessary for a productive, and hopefully more collectively inspired, reconciliation of planning and preservation on the waterfront.⁵³

NOTES

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Project during its various stages. Versions of this essay were presented at the 2008 meetings of the International Planning History Society and the Urban History Association.

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2. Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *Comprehensive Area Plan: Cities of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Michigan* (St. Louis: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, Inc., 1955), 62–77.

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4. Rep. Clare Hoffman (R-Mich.) secured Congressional authorization to abandon the easternmost one thousand feet of the canal, including the turning basin. See also William John Armstrong, “Bung Town Canal,” *Michigan History Magazine* 76 (January/February, 1992): 19–20.

5. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006). See also Robert Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2004), for the most lengthy treatment to date on how museums might serve as venues for deliberating a community’s preservation and planning concerns.

6. See www.harborshoresresort.com. The most extensive treatment of Jensen’s landscape designs is Robert E. Grese’s *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

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13. Katherine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2d ed., eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 310–21.

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43. Hayden, *The Power of Place*. See also Mary Hufford, ed., *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Part I; Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht, *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005). On waterfront development, see Ann Breen, *Waterfronts: Cities Reclaim Their Edge* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994); *Urban Waterfront Revitalization: the Role of Recreation and Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, 1980); Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, *Caution, Working Waterfront: The Impact of Change on Marine Enterprises* (Washington, D.C.: Waterfront Press, 1985); Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, *The New Waterfront: A Worldwide Urban Success Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); Ann Breen and Dick Rigby, *Designing Your Waterfronts* (Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities); Bonnie Fisher et al., *Remaking the Urban Waterfront* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 2004); Richard Marshall, *Waterfronts in Post-Industrial Cities* (New York: Spoon Press, 2001); Douglas M. Wrenn, *Urban Waterfront Development* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1983); Stephen McGovern, "Evolving Visions of Waterfront Development in Postindustrial Philadelphia: The Formative Role of Elite Ideologies," *Journal of Planning History OnlineFirst* (June 2008), <http://jph.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/1538513208315756v1>; Dennis Keating, Norman Krumholz, and Ann Marie Wieland, "Cleveland's Lakefront: Its Development and Planning," *Journal of Planning History* 4 (2005): 129–54; J. R. Short, L. M. Benton, W. B. Luce, and J. Walton, "Reconstructing the Image of an Industrial City," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83 (1993): 207–24; R. Timothy Sieber, "Waterfront Revitalization in Postindustrial Port Cities of North America," *City and Society* 5 (1993): 120–36; Kevin Bone, ed., *The New York Waterfront: Evolution and Building Culture of the Port and Harbor* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997).
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47. Ibid., 29. The magnitude of concern for "working waterfronts" that balance historic preservation, cultural conservation, environmental sustainability, and economic development is reflected in the number of conferences, nonprofit institutions, and government programs dedicated to the subject. The Island Institute in Maine has addressed this issue for twenty-five years, and its holistic approach is an example of how public history—as a process, not just a presentational outcome—can make historic preservation a more active ingredient in the maintenance of working waterfronts. State programs, such as Maine's Working Waterfront Initiative and guidelines proposed by New York State's

Division of Coastal Resources and Florida's Waterways and Waterfronts Project offer valuable institutional frameworks and legislation for implementing historic preservation but would benefit from public history's capacity to mobilize community involvement and equip citizens with greater contextual understanding of historical issues that shaped the waterfront. Public forums concerning working waterfronts, on regional, national, and international levels, are occurring with greater frequency, such as the conference "Managing Change in Coastal Communities," Edinburgh, UK, May 14, 2008, and the Waterfront Center's, Urban Waterfronts 26 Conference 2008 in Chicago with a panel expressly titled, "Working Waterfront—Getting the Balance Right."

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