

# Creating outdoor trail signage

## Part 1: Planning and design

by Ellen Miller and Aaron Novodvorsky

**Authors' note:** At the Minnesota Historical Society's Local History Services workshops in Spring 2007, we presented a talk called "Outdoor exhibits: Place, environment, human stories." Now we've expanded that presentation into a two-part Tech Talk on outdoor trail signs, adding new information, a project timetable and other checklists. Part 1 covers project planning, sign development and design. Part 2, to appear in the July-August 2008 Interpreter, will discuss fabrication and installation.

Suppose there's plenty to see at your outdoor site but not enough visitors know about it. Your board of directors suggests putting up outdoor trail signs like they've seen at other places to draw visitors in. They give you the go-ahead and now it's up to you to make it happen. Don't know where to turn? Here are some strategies to ensure that you end up with signs that will enhance your visitors' experience.

### Start with a basic plan

First, clarify your goal. Think of it as a mission statement for your project: to attract visitors to your outdoor site by creating markers that tell concise stories with compelling images in a form that can withstand all kinds of weather.

Next, rough out a plan. That's the key to any kind of exhibit, no matter how it's delivered. Start by learning as much as you can about your audience. Don't forget the logistics of how they'll use your site. Ask yourself questions like these:



*Consider how visitors will use your sign. Does it need to catch the eye of passing drivers? Or is it meant to entice hikers to stop along a trail?*

- Who is your audience – children, young adults, families, adults without children, seniors?
- Do they come from the local community or from far away?
- How do they get to your site?
- How will they engage with your outdoor site? Will they walk a trail? Drive through? Ski?
- How long do you want them to stay – 30 minutes? An hour? Two hours?

As you begin to piece together your sign project, remember the 3/30/3 rule, a useful guideline for planning any exhibit. That rule, put forth in the book "Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Place," by

Michael Gross, Jim Buchholz and Ron Zimmerman, goes something like this:

- You have three seconds to catch your visitors' attention.
- You have 30 seconds to persuade them to read the text.
- Visitors will spend, on average, three minutes reading and absorbing the information.

That means your signs must be eye-catching, get straight to the point and tell a story succinctly.

**Creating outdoor trail signage –**  
continued on page 4

Minnesota Historical Society photos

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued



What information do you want people to take away? From this sign along the Lewis and Clark Trail, visitors learn why dugout canoes were important to the expedition and how they were made.



Connect your story to the environment. A map of this view in Roosevelt National Park shows visitors what they are looking at.

### Develop your themes

To choose the stories you wish to tell on your signs, think carefully about the site.

- What happened where you want to put the trail signage?
- How will you connect it to what your visitors are looking at?
- Will the site require signs for more than one story?

Once you've determined what the story or stories will be, try putting yourself in the visitors' shoes. Consider the following:

- Why should the story matter to them?
- What information do you want them to take away?

Then concentrate on ways to engage your visitors in the story. Establishing connections with them improves your chances of success under the 3/30/3 rule.

- Tell your stories in the first person. Letting people from the past speak in their own words is much more effective than trying to synthesize their experiences. Visitors will get a better sense of what really happened – and you will build a stronger bridge

between the past and present – if those who lived it tell their own story.

- Remember that there is usually more than one side to every story. Seek diverse points of view. If one of your stories deals with a contentious issue, tell all sides of it and let visitors come to their own conclusions.
- Make your signage visually appealing. Whenever possible, link first-person stories to photographs. Let eye-catching graphics work their magic. And make ample use of color.

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued

### Use outside experts

Don't hesitate to bring others into your planning process. You're likely to get a far more interesting product if you open yourself up to new ideas and viewpoints.

- Consult experts and specialists in areas related to your subject. If you're doing signs about natural history, for example, call on the Minnesota DNR or recruit a faculty member or graduate student from your local college. Professionals are happy to help and will usually do so for free. Don't be shy about asking.
- If your story involves Native American content, be sure to engage Indian advisors to work with you from the beginning of your project. Don't present them with a finished product, expecting rubber-stamp approval.

- Use volunteers to help you research story content and identify and locate images.
- Tap others in your community, such as local librarians and teachers, to serve as content reviewers. Their input and insights into your subject may prove invaluable.
- Consider hiring an editor to help you polish your text before committing it to print on a long-lasting sign.

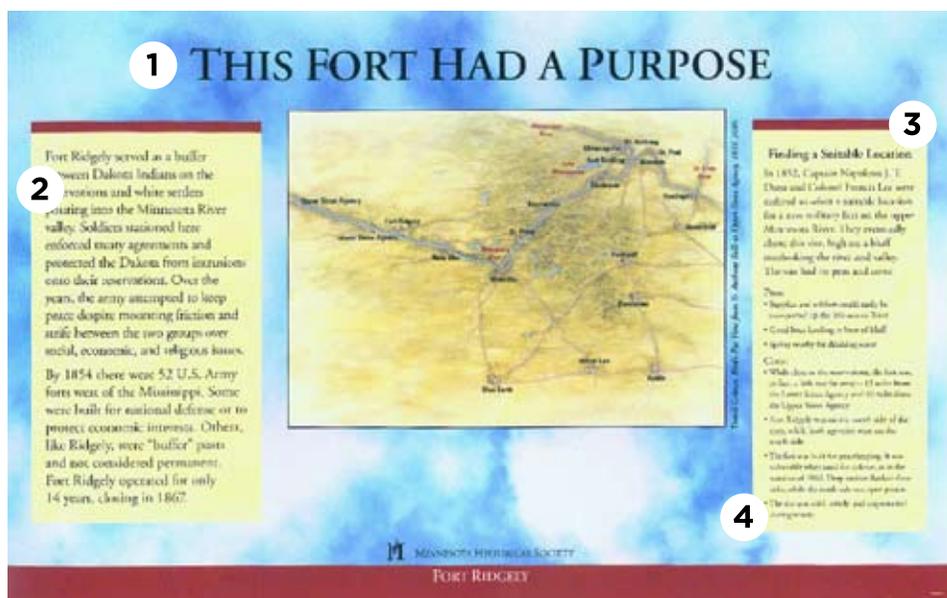
As you wrap others into your project, it's important to map out the development process. To break the project into manageable chunks – research, writing and editing, selection of visuals, project review and approval – set some internal deadlines and monitor your progress along the way. This allows for course correction before you've invested a huge amount of time on a theme or story that doesn't pan out.

### Be brief

The best signs get their message across with an economy of words. Some suggestions:

- Tell only one story per trail sign.
- Make sure that each story begins and ends on a single panel. If two panels must be used, they should sit side by side. Visitors are unlikely to stick with the story if they have to move from sign to sign to get the gist of it.
- Visitors typically prefer short, easily digestible text sections. Keeping your text to paragraphs of 25 to 75 words each increases the likelihood that visitors will read the sign.

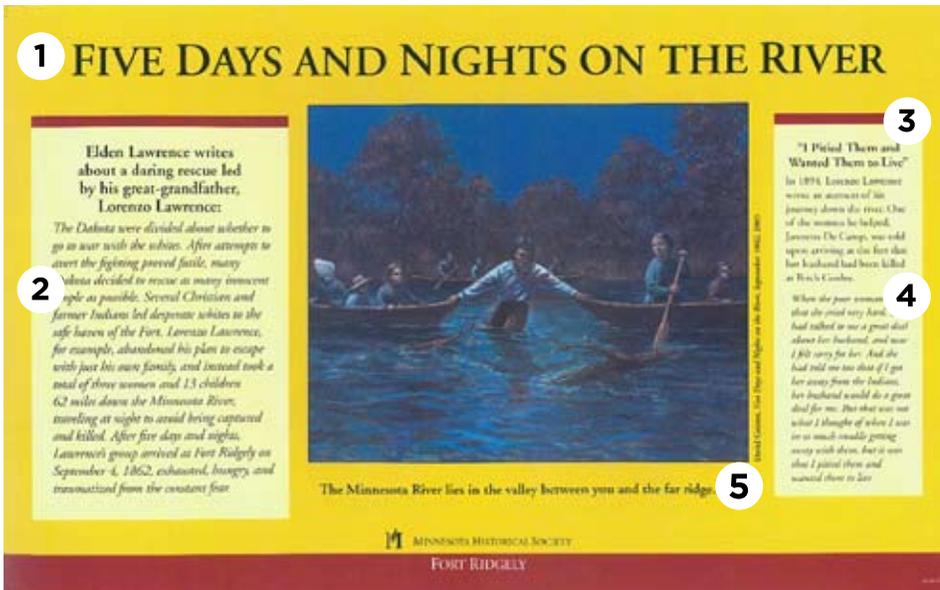
Creating outdoor trail signage – continued on page 6



- 1. Title:** attracts attention (1-7 words)
- 2. Main label:** big idea (20-150 words) often includes a lead graphic image
- 3. Pull-out quotes:** gives a voice (5-20 words)
- 4. Sidebar:** more detail or interesting facts (20-75 words)

To increase chances that your sign will be read, keep blocks of text brief and aim for a balance of one third words, one third images and one third blank space. On this sign about Fort Ridgely, guidelines on word count were stretched for the sake of a good story.

## Creating outdoor trail signage – continued



1. Title: 130 point

2. Main text: 40 point

3. Sidebar title: 36 point

4. Sidebar text: 28 point

5. Graphic ID: 22 point

Make sure that the font size and style on your sign are easy to read. These sample guidelines for a sign at Fort Ridgely show the relative sizes of various components.

### Good design is key

Once your stories are written and your images selected, you're ready to begin the design process. This is a critical stage in your project. Without good graphic design, your signs may fail to attract visitors to your site.

For best results, hire a graphic designer rather than doing your own signs. It's a plus to find someone with exhibits experience. Try getting a referral from a site whose signs you have found successful. Look at applicants' design portfolios to make sure they have the kind of experience you need for your project.

### Prepare for production

In this digital age, the end product of the design stage is a CD or DVD containing all the graphics files you'll send on to a production house. To make sure your signs are production-ready,

it's important to put them through a final-approval process.

You probably approved the text and image selection earlier in the project. Now it's time to put them together and review the layout of your signs exactly as they will appear. Be sure not to skip this often-overlooked but crucial step of proofreading your sign panels before submitting them for production. It's a good idea to call in someone unfamiliar with their content to read through the copy and look at the visuals. An extra pair of eyes may catch errors that have escaped your notice. This is your chance to make last-minute changes. Any changes made later in the production process will be much more expensive.

That brings us to sign fabrication. In Part 2 of this Tech Talk, to appear in the July-August 2008 issue, we'll discuss sign production and review a

variety of materials for both signs and frames. We'll also cover some factors to consider before installation. Finally, we'll map out a start-to-finish project timetable. ■

Ellen Miller, an exhibit developer, and Aaron Novodvorsky, an exhibit project manager, both with the Minnesota Historical Society, have been working in their respective areas of expertise for more than 14 years. They can be reached by email or phone: [ellen.miller@mnhs.org](mailto:ellen.miller@mnhs.org) or 651-259-3060, and [aaron.novodvorsky@mnhs.org](mailto:aaron.novodvorsky@mnhs.org) or 651-259-3052.