

# HUNTER HOUSE

## INTERPRETIVE PLAN

### 2020-2023



APPROVED BY THE MUSEUM BOARD: 11/21/2019

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BIRMINGHAM  
*The* MUSEUM

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An interpretative plan is a foundational document that helps museums and historical institutions tell their stories, interpret their resources and achieve their overall missions. It functions as a guide for planning and targeting programming and community engagement activities by setting out specific objectives and desirable outcomes. By its nature, it is a flexible document that changes as conditions change.

The John West Hunter House has the remarkable status of being the oldest house in Oakland County, and one of only a handful of the oldest dwellings in the entire State of Michigan. It has been part of the Birmingham Museum site, which includes the 1926 Allen House, owned and operated by the City of Birmingham, since 2001. The property was purchased by the city in 1969. Formerly, it was operated as a historic house museum by the Birmingham Historical Society, now known as the Friends of the Birmingham Museum.

New opportunities have arisen in recent years as technology and the museum field has evolved. In a recent report, the American Association of State and Local History found that visitation to small history museums has increased since 2013 by nearly 13%, with small organizations experiencing greater growth than large ones.<sup>1</sup> At the Birmingham Museum, we have seen an even greater increase during the period, with our visitation increasing from 2013 to 2018 by 59%, with exponential growth in virtual visitation and engagement during the period. This is attributable to our efforts to understand our audiences and adapting to changes in interest and communication preferences, and suggests that incorporating our experience into a specific interpretive plan is timely.

Dynamic and engaging methods of presenting Birmingham's history at the Hunter House are increasingly available. Updated approaches based on best practices are needed to effectively interpret the building and our story while creatively enhancing utilization of the collection. Thoughtful focus on interpretive objectives will help develop more meaningful events, programs, and exhibits that further the Birmingham Museum mission through its 2017-2020 Strategic Plan, making the Hunter House and its story more accessible to everyone. Specifically, our strategic plan calls for the Birmingham Museum to (Goal I, C):

***Develop an interpretive plan for both buildings. Enhance utilization of the collection by engaging in impactful events, activities, programs and exhibits.***

An effective interpretive plan for the Hunter House will help achieve the following:

- 1) Identify and clarify some of our site's main stories
- 2) Tell our stories more engagingly by helping audiences form connections to the Hunter House and its past
- 3) Identify opportunities for programming
- 4) Seek potential new audiences and reinforce existing ones
- 5) Demonstrate preparedness and planning to potential partners and funding sources

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<sup>1</sup> AASLH, National Visitation Report, November, 2019, <https://learn.aaslh.org/national-visitation-report>.

## PROCESS

The Hunter House Interpretive Plan was developed collaboratively between museum staff and the Museum Board to apply strategic plan objectives with staff experience and museum practices in mind. Each of several components was proposed by staff and reviewed by the Museum Board over several months in 2019 to create this document. Concepts from the larger field of museum work were also incorporated as applicable to Hunter House and museum resources and objectives, but visitor experience provided the most important source.



It is a key priority for the museum to respond to our expanding audience's interests, both in physical and virtual contexts. To that end, we have been attending to visitor preferences and interactive engagement patterns to gain a sense of what works best for content and format. We have found that artifacts, images, documents, displays, the site, and the building itself create the greatest interest when connected with themes of everyday life, food ways,

women and children's activities, and family stories. The Hunter House Interpretive Plan incorporates these varied sources in addition to social media to create the most effective presentation of the site and Birmingham's history.

## PLAN COMPONENTS

Successful interpretive plans are composed of elements that identify audience needs, central themes, specific objectives and methods that will make the best use of available resources. These component parts of the Hunter House Interpretive Plan are clarified below.

### I. INTERPRETIVE OBJECTIVES

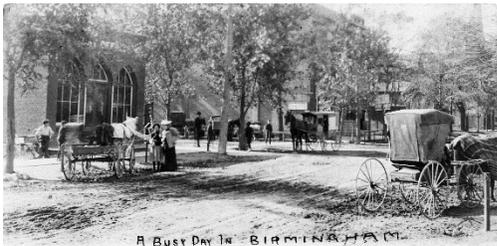
The Hunter House Interpretive Plan Objectives are designed to specify desired outcomes—what the museum wants to see as a result of effective interpretation. They integrate with the museum's overall strategic plan, are stated as general objectives to allow for adaptability, and are measurable. The plan objectives give direction and focus in interpretive activities.



1. Enhancement of visitor experience
  - a. Engagement opportunities
  - b. Educational experiences

2. Enhancement of collection and historical resources
  - a. Artifacts
  - b. Information
3. Increased community support
  - a. Manpower/volunteer resources
  - b. Financial donations
4. Civic engagement and partnerships

## II. THEMATIC FOCUS



Thematic emphasis provides historic and cultural context that imparts meaning and defines the relationship of Birmingham's stories to the larger picture of American history. Many themes can be applied to historic sites and objects, but visitor experience is enhanced when conceptual ideas are prioritized into key focus areas that organize interpretive content into easy to understand patterns. The themes and sub-themes with the greatest value for conveying Birmingham's place in the larger society are listed below in chronological, not preferential, order. They span the period before settlement up to recent history, affording numerous opportunities to tell stories from varying points of view.

1. Pioneer settlement of Oakland County
  - a. War of 1812
  - b. Early settlers and community
  - c. Early territorial environment
    - i. Saginaw Trail
    - ii. Rouge River/Landscape
    - iii. Native American occupation and relationships with settlers
  - d. Building technology of the period
  - e. Greenwood Cemetery and its founding
2. Civil War period in local life
3. Building of Birmingham
  - a. Agricultural
  - b. Commercial
  - c. Government/Civic
4. Early 19th to 20th century culture in everyday life
  - a. Foodways
  - b. Roles of men, women, and children
5. Preservation/conservation movement of the 1960s/1970s; how a community's needs change over time

### III. CULTURAL AND HISTORIC RESOURCES

This component of the plan addresses the major physical objects and the primary stories associated with them to build a conceptual timeline for virtual and site visitors. It is the framework that will tie the physical space and museum artifacts to the themes that have been identified, bringing them down to earth and making them tangible for a better experience by visitors of all ages. The Hunter House Interpretive Plan primarily emphasize the historic and cultural resources in the Birmingham Museum collection, although borrowing objects from other institutions or utilizing public domain content may be used to support or strengthen items interpreted from the museum collection.



1. Building and Site
  - a. Interior
    - i. Heritage room for visual 'scrapbook timeline' and display case; other rooms interpreted functionally
    - ii. Wall exposure window
    - iii. Birmingham-related objects and artifacts whenever possible, with other furnishings as support for period interpretation
  - b. Exterior
    - i. Building/architectural history
    - ii. Site history, Allen Play House
2. Artifacts and Objects specific to historic people-displayed and directly interpreted by docents (minimal labels, use of literature and/or QR coding)
  - a. Hunter-sleigh bells, white pine slab
  - b. Hamilton-folding fork and knife
  - c. Swan desk (to replace existing secretary)
  - d. Raynale portrait
  - e. Randall portrait
  - f. Fouracre oil lamp
  - g. Clizbe Melodion
  - h. Period garments, household items, and furnishings from collection as needed to support thematic objectives
3. Collection photos/maps/architectural drawings/illustrations for virtual and physical literature and displays
  - a. Building
  - b. Site
  - c. People (see list below)

4. Other illustrations not in collection
  - a. First surveyor and original parcel maps and documents
  - b. Museum-generated illustrations and maps
  - c. Period illustrations
5. Priority stories/people
  - a. Hunter/Willits/Hamilton families (various)
  - b. Imri Fish, Ziba Swan and the Utter murders; the Fish family, Greenwood Cemetery
  - c. Ebenezer Raynale, early Birmingham, pioneer communities and roles
  - d. Henry Randall, the Civil War and post-war Birmingham, moving the Hunter House
  - e. The Fouracres-Alice, Albert, Edna; the Titanic, DUR, Spanish flu
  - f. Wallace Frost at Hunter House
  - g. Rosemary Barnhardt, Great Depression and rental period
  - h. Flacks and the preservation of the Hunter House

#### IV. STORY-BASED METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION



As the Birmingham Museum audience ranges widely in age, interest, and preferred experience format (e.g., virtual or physical experience), offering a variety of interpretive approaches will best meet their needs in telling our stories. These options can be adapted for availability of resources (such as personnel) as appropriate and as conditions allow. In some cases, interpretive content may be made available indirectly through literature or self-experiences, while in others it can be provided directly through personal interaction. Interpretive methods can also be utilized

on or off site, and presented virtually or in person. Story telling opportunities, technologies and resources are anticipated to change rapidly in the future, so methods of implementation need to remain flexible to be successful.

1. Direct Interpretation Opportunities
  - a. Exhibits and displays (on and off site)
    - i. Municipal Building, other city facilities
    - ii. other institutions or pop-ups (ex: YMCA, post office; Harry Allen Room/Idealab at Baldwin Library; storefronts with a 'traveling exhibit;' display during election; etc)
  - b. Guided and self-guided tours (on and off site)
    - i. Hunter House, Greenwood guided and self-guided tours
    - ii. Themed and ticketed specialty tours of the Hunter House

- c. Lectures and presentations, including conference/joint presentations as appropriate
  - d. Interactive programs and activities
  - e. Site events and participation at local community events as appropriate
  - f. Exterior signage (Hunter House porch) with site information such as QR code to online exhibits/maps/brochures (future apps) for afterhours visitors, to be coordinated with overall site
2. Print Publication Options
    - a. Handouts/brochures of details about Hunter House historic resources (ex: can be provided/recycled at end of tours)
    - b. Short booklets, printed/self-published
      - a. Print media (history magazines, etc.)
  3. Virtual/Electronic Content Options
    - a. Brief video and/or audio presentations
    - b. Electronic articles and photos
    - c. Website
    - d. eNewsletters
    - e. Online local media/newspapers
    - f. Electronic exhibits (links, QR, apps, etc.)
  4. Social Media/Interactive
    - g. Facebook
    - h. Instagram
    - i. Twitter and other social media platforms as appropriate

## PLAN REVIEW

As a flexible plan document, the Hunter House Interpretive Plan will ideally change with changing conditions, new approaches, enlargement of the collection and new knowledge that becomes available about Birmingham's story and the larger culture.

As interpretation is an integral part of museum planning and operations, regular discussion of interpretive activities will be addressed on a monthly basis at public Museum Board meetings, with a verbal report by the Museum Director to the Museum Board on an annual basis. A written report and review of the Hunter House Interpretive Plan document will take place on a three year cycle in accordance with the review of the Birmingham Museum Strategic Plan. Through these mechanisms, the public may participate in discussions of the plan on both an informal and formal basis. In addition, input and feedback from visitors is welcome as part of ongoing operations at the museum.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Alliance of Museums, "Interpretive Planning," <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/resource-library/education-and-interpretation-2/interpretive-planning/>

American Association for State and Local History, *National Visitation Report (November, 2019)*. <https://learn.aaslh.org/national-visitation-report>.

National Association for Interpretation, *Interpretation Standards: A Pathway Towards Excellence*, <https://interpretationstandards.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/standards-2018.pdf>

National Park Service, *Comprehensive Interpretive Planning*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/upload/cip-guideline.pdf>