

THE COBBLESTONE MUSEUM EXHIBIT HALL

As the large exhibit hall and future Cobblestone Museum nears completion, increasing concern is being given as to how this space will be utilized. As all museums are judged by the exhibits they present to the public, it is here that the Society faces its most enduring challenge. General public acceptance in the future will be determined by the degree to which the Society can measure up to commonly accepted museum standards in its exhibits and restorations.

Lacking a professional staff, the Board of Directors will soon face problems that only trained museum personnel should be required to answer. Thus guidelines are urgently needed for the volunteer workers and officers of the Society.

One of the clearest and certainly the most commonly accepted guide has been provided by a former director of the New York State Museum, Carl Guthe. THE MANAGEMENT OF THE SMALL HISTORY MUSEUM - a 68 page bulletin of the American Association for State and Local History, 1959, is now the guide for museums large and small. The following excerpts related to museum exhibits are quoted directly:

"Experimentation and experience have established some general principles and techniques of good museum display practices that are widely accepted in the museum world.

"Museum exhibits are created for the public. Their purpose is to interest, inform and stimulate visitors and to encourage them to repeat an enjoyable and profitable experience.

"Exhibits justify the existence of a museum as to public service institution.

"The exhibit program of each history museum differs from that in every other because it reflects the significant experiences of the community it serves and the attitudes and policies of the citizens who direct its activities.

"History museums should not display articles just because they are antiques or curios.

"Static museums are dead museums. New exhibits and the rearrangement of materials in existing ones have come to symbolize the vitality of the institution. A successful exhibit program should include provision for the regular revision and improvement of existing displays and for the use of temporary exhibits.

"The reason for having public exhibit halls is to entice people to come and see the things that are on display and to become acquainted with the work of the museum.

"It is important that exhibits have a clearly recognized unity. Three different exhibit patterns may be followed in creating this desirable unity

"One popular pattern . . . consists of showing similar examples of a single class of materials. Such displays can be attractive if they are not too crowded.

"Another (second) exhibit pattern is that in which the exhibits demonstrate the developmental changes in a class of objects or an activity. For example, objects illustrating the story of lighting from the time of the torch . . . to electricity.

(In a third concept)". . . the objects shown are subordinated to the interpretation of an historical theme rather than serving as the center of interest. Each unit of the pattern deals with some incident in history. Exhibit continuity is obtained by arranging these units in chronological order. The displays may be period rooms illustrating contemporary furnishings and related customs. This exhibit pattern is the most difficult of the three to achieve, but it is the most satisfactory method of establishing unity in an exhibit program.

". . . it should be self-evident that the continuity and living quality of history must be the theme that unites all elements of the exhibit program. All three exhibit patterns may be used, provided the one that interprets historical themes is dominant and the continuity of the story which unifies the entire program is not obscured.

"A well-organized exhibit program will enable the visitor to orient himself quickly, to proceed through the exhibits in a logical manner observing and enjoying each successive display, and to depart with a better understanding of the meaning of history and convinced that the museum is an interesting and useful public institution."

Mr. Guthe continues by explaining the basic steps necessary for organizing a worthwhile exhibit.

"Planning it on paper in detail, before starting its installation, is an efficient and time-saving procedure. The project may be treated as if it were a book with a series of chapter titles and subtitles. The outline of the imaginary book is then translated into the series of displays As the exhibit plan unfolds, the available space for displays will require a reduction in the number of subjects dealt with in the outline and the abbreviation of the interpretation of each..... The next step is to plan the organization of the individual displays, each of which should have internal unity..... These details may be plotted on diagrams which can be compared easily and revised prior to installation.

Each display "should be sufficiently attractive and interesting to win and hold the attention of the observer, and yet it should indicate clearly its relationship to the other displays. The unity so desirable in the entire exhibit program should also exist in the individual exhibit.

"As soon as work is begun upon the details of arrangement, a new set of problems requiring decisions is encountered, such as the number and kinds of objects to be used and how they are to be arranged; the nature of the accompanying charts, diagrams or photographs; the size, number, and character of textual explanations and interpretations; and the various colors and types of lighting appropriate to the theme on display."

Mr. Guthe has presented these principles so clearly that they seem like common sense. Actually this common sense has failed to reach many museums. The late New York State Historian, Dr. Corey, said in his preface to this Guide:

"Too many small history museums still belie the name of museum. Many are little more than depositories of historical objects. Their collections are not adequately cataloged or are not cataloged at all. Their methods of preservation do credit to attic storehouses. Their exhibits are little more than organized confusion. Too often they are proud to own relics that are meaningful only to them and a small body of associates. Articles are exhibited because of their sentimental value to the few or to donors, not because they illumine the human processes of the past."

Perhaps, most of all, these words point out the pressing need for a professional curator. Until that time however, the immediate need is to begin exhibits with definite professional standards. Mr. Guthe has clearly pointed the way.

How does all this relate to the Cobblestone Museum? Obviously our museum must develop its own theme or story to present to the public. Such themes must grow out of our regions history and the purposes of our Society. No other museum is so well equipped to explain:

- the history of Western New York and Orleans County
- the unique cobblestone heritage of our region
- life and times of this region during the cobblestone era
- the development of Childs, our headquarters hamlet

Our museum buildings and exhibits must be made to tell these stories to the public through changing exhibits that shall keep our members, and eventually the paying public, coming back year after year.

Of the three "patterns" or types of exhibits, Mr. Guthe says that the third (a theme or story approach to exhibits) is best, with the second or chronological exhibit second best. The first which merely groups related objects together, has some advantages. The fourth and unmentioned exhibit would be the chaos of unrelated clutter. Unfortunately there are museums in Western New York in this category.

These themes can be developed in several ways. The cobblestone church and school exteriors show the development of the cobblestone art from 1834 to 1849. Their continued restoration, their interiors can present church and school life of this region during the cobblestone era. The exhibit hall can present each of these themes, one at a time, in a wide variety of ways.

What exhibits should go into the Cobblestone Museum, our major exhibit hall? Examples listed are only a few of the possibilities:

I. The Development of Cobblestone Masonry, 1825 - 1860

- A. Beginnings
- B. Examples
- C. Masons, Tools, etc., etc.

II. Life in Western New York in the Cobblestone Days

- A. Occupations
- B. Religion
- C. Clothing, Customs, etc., etc.

III. Development of Nearby Towns

IV. Ridge Road in Stagecoach Days

- A. Childs and the Village Inn
- B. Other Taverns
- C. Commerce, etc.

V. Early Industries and/or Handicrafts

VI. The Erie Canal in Orleans County

- A. Construction
- B. Opening
- C. Effect on Area
- D. Enlargements

VII. Household Furnishings in the Cobblestone Era

- A. Furniture Styles
- B. Lighting and Heating Devices
- C. Utensils Used, etc.

Thus, the exhibit hall needs to be kept uncluttered. Nothing should be installed until it has been established what purpose and story to tell. Exhibits ought to be changed as often as possible and objects used must be part of a total exhibit or theme in which all objects seen are related to each other.

Achieving these goals in our exhibits will be a constant challenge in the future but also a wonderful opportunity to establish a vital, living museum.

Robert Frasch
President
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