

# Portals to Our National Heritage

by John Stilgoe

Heritage is more than inheritance. Wise planners, savvy chambers-of-commerce, even future-oriented independent businessmen have already glimpsed the tremendous potential implicit in heritage-based planning and merchandising. As the average age of Americans increases, more and more Americans find a "natural" interest in the past, and not only in "their" past of the 1940s and 50s, but of pasts beyond their own. With just a little skill, a little effort,

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any community can tap into the extraordinary energy generated by the graying of America and the nationwide sense of rapid change brought on by technological and social transformation.

By *inheritance*, attorneys mean the tangible items left to heirs — real estate, furniture, livestock and junk bonds, sailboats and lawnmowers, all things that can be sold at auction or given away.

*Heritage* means something much more important, something intangible, something greater than the sum of all the inherited pieces. It means the values, life-shaping experiences, and everyday activities that produced the character of living people, a sort of spiritual bank account on which the living draw for advice and support when needed, and into which the living make deposits for posterity.

Planners ought to distinguish between inheritance and heritage because most municipalities and counties have only a few trinkets of the national inheritance but a massive stake in the national heritage.

As many local historical societies discover, trying to make most places "historic with a capital H" proves very hard indeed, for few places have the historic inheritance of Ply-

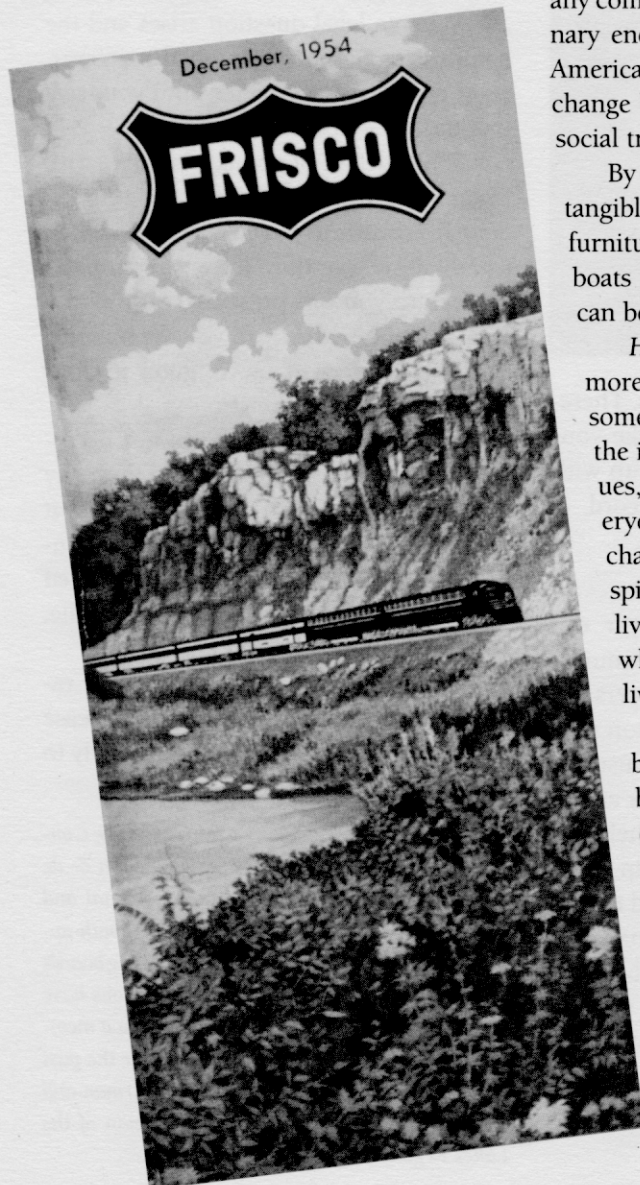
mouth in Massachusetts, St. Augustine in Florida, or Red Cloud in Nebraska. Tourists will journey to see the replica of the *Mayflower* or the old Spanish fort or the scenes Willa Cather worked into her novels, but they pass through other places they often dismiss as "ordinary."

Over and over, mayors, planners, and historical society directors bemoan the utter ordinariness of their municipalities. "Nothing important even happened here. No Civil War battle, no great fire, no political speech, nothing." Asked to walk about their downtowns, their residential streets, their factory areas in search of historic things, they walk past a wealth of things they dismiss as unimportant or out-of-date if they see them at all.

But let the bits and pieces be torn up to make way for progress, and the antique dealers begin pawing through them, selecting everything from cobblestones to fire alarm boxes to cast-iron hitching posts. Properly displayed in their stores, the dealers know, the junk becomes valuable, not only for its beautiful shape and color, but for its "historical associations" — its associations with a larger, deeper heritage.

Planners need to sift antiques from junk, and focus attention on the antiques not so much as things important in themselves, but as portals to the national heritage. As historians now emphasize, everyday life is important indeed. But children still often learn history as a series of major events which usually happened away from their town or city. Even "ordinary" places can tap into the growing force of the national heritage, and become places that energize their inhabitants and reach out to tourists.

Railroads offer a useful example here. For many years, railroads struck Americans as utterly ordinary. But more recently, a whole business has developed selling railroad antiques — everything from switch lanterns to grade-crossing signals to faded





A bank is located in this totally restored caboose and passenger car in Fayetteville, Arkansas

timetables — to railroad buffs intrigued by the passing of the steam locomotive, railway mail, and even cabooses.

Some municipalities, sensing this explosion of interest have allied with astute non-profit groups to erect museums devoted to railroading. But in many towns, especially small towns in which the tracks cross Main Street at right angles, the only inheritance is a boarded-up depot. What can a planner do?

A planner might scrutinize Fayetteville, Arkansas. At a classic turn-of-the-century business district lies an active railroad grade crossing and a closed station — and there stands an immaculately restored wooden caboose, still on its trucks and still sporting its kerosene lanterns, and coupled to an equally finely restored passenger car. Shining in their paint and polish, sitting on a side track parallel to the railroad station, the cars appear like an apparition from the past, an apparition that is a bank. And a few stores away from the bank, next to a second-hand bookstore, the traveler finds a hobby shop specializing in “railroadiana” and begins making connections. Long ago Fayetteville was just one more stop on the St. Louis-San Francisco, but now it is a town intimately connected not to its paltry railroad inheritance, but to the national rail-

road heritage.

Conversation with local retailers produces the not surprising discovery that they are contemplating locating stores and offices in remodeled railroad cars set in this district — and that owners of buildings adjacent to the tracks have begun restoring them. Fayetteville has figured out the difference between inheritance and heritage, and opted for heritage.

Across the nation, small cities and county seats, even crossroads villages deep in rural counties, are slowly discovering that they have very sketchy inheritances, often nothing physical of enough mass or importance to create a major tourist attraction. But here and there, astute planners and historical society members — and perhaps most importantly, local business people — have begun to understand that amidst what passes for junk are antiques that offer portals into a deep and rich *national* heritage.

Rather than back-dating Main Street facades or redesigning signage, planners might ponder the possibilities implicit in sifting ordinary structure and space, including all the “junk” like abandoned grain elevators and derelict side tracks, with a view toward utilizing the discovered antiques as generators of new forms and con-

catenations of space and structure that tie local people to the national heritage and tell visitors that a place knows about its past.



Sometimes all that is necessary is a sign like the one in Norwell, Massachusetts informing coming-ashore sea-kayakers that long ago sailing ships went forth from the landing up which they now wade. Sometimes something more is possible, as with the railroad-car bank in Fayetteville. Sometimes something in-between in scale — say a permanently illuminated railroad semaphore signal aimed not up the track but up Main Street — is enough to connect place to heritage. ♦

*John Stilgoe is the author of Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, and Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene, among other books and articles. He is the Robert & Lois Orchard Professor of the History of Landscape at Harvard University. Stilgoe's previous column for the Journal, "Walking Into Trouble: Planning and Physical Un-Fitness," can be found in Issue 4, May/June 1992.*