

News of the Church

Building History, Building Testimonies

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The Lord commands us to remember (see D&C 21:1), but history, like a photograph bleached by time, often fades until it is lost—unless someone steps in and stops it from being lost.

Steven L. Olsen, senior curator of the Church History Department and former member of the Church Historic Sites Committee, is one of those people. The Historic Sites Committee collaborates with several departments to help stop time in its tracks by preserving places of historical value to the Church.

“We preserve sites to help provide an experience that opens a person’s heart and soul to the message [of the gospel],” he said. “Many have found the beginnings of their testimonies when they have gone to the historic sites and had the Spirit bear witness to them.”

The Church History Department stewards the historical accuracy of the messages, furnishings, and settings found at historic sites.

The Missionary Department takes care of managing the sites daily, welcoming visitors, giving tours, and answering questions.

The Temple and Special Projects Departments are responsible for managing any maintenance concerns for temples and for the construction of major new projects.

The Meetinghouse Facilities Department ensures that each site is properly constructed and maintained and that the site stays accurate, attractive, and appropriate.

These departments work with historians, architects, archaeologists, lawyers, artisans, contractors, and groundskeepers to preserve historic sites, landmarks, and markers.



In Missouri, Saints can tour a replica of Liberty Jail, where Doctrine and Covenants 121 to 123 originated as the Prophet Joseph Smith and others were subjected to many hardships.

Historic Sites

Historic sites are places where events of great significance to Church history occurred, such as the Joseph Smith farm or historic Kirtland. About two dozen historic sites dot the United States, with one site outside the United States, Worcestershire’s Gadfield Elm Chapel, the first chapel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in England.

Historic Landmarks

Historic landmarks, of which there are about four dozen, comprise temples, tabernacles, and meetinghouses that are distinctive in architectural or aesthetic value. According to Brother Olsen, these landmarks exist to celebrate the importance of worship in the Church.

“In our history, we have invested a lot of energy to create spaces that are appropriate for the nature of that worship,” he said. “Temples do that in a way

Church to Restore Harmony Site

In April 2011, the First Presidency announced plans to restore a historic site formerly known as Harmony (near present-day Susquehanna), Pennsylvania, USA, where the Prophet Joseph Smith translated much of the Book of Mormon and where John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood in 1829.

The project will include construction of historic buildings and the farm setting at Harmony as well as monuments commemorating the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods in 1829. The groundbreaking is expected to take place in 2012, and the project is estimated to take two years to complete.

Church leaders have invited members who are interested to make a small, one-time contribution to the project. This can be done by specifying “Priesthood Restoration Site” on the “Other” category on the tithing slip that is available from bishops and branch presidents.

“Our historic sites help us tell the unique story of the Latter-day Saints,” said Elder Marlin K. Jensen, Church historian and recorder. “Each site is filled with historically accurate details and engaging exhibits to help people better understand who we are and what is important to us.”

that . . . allows us all to receive those blessings. Tabernacles and meetinghouses provide another way to worship.”

Historic Markers

Finally, because not every important site can be restored, historic markers—more than 100 of them—identify other places the Church desires to preserve in the hearts and minds of Latter-day Saints. Markers can also designate areas (such as the Far West Temple site) where there is not enough information to restore the site accurately.

There are dozens of international historic markers; often a marker being placed is the first step to a location becoming a historic site.

“People recognize that a place is important to them and to the Church, and many work to get a marker in that location,” Sister Lund said. For those who are interested in marking a location, she said, “there’s a policy and a process; they just need to contact the Church History Department.”

The Importance of Historic Sites

One of the qualifications for a place to become a historic site is that the site communicate key gospel messages, which Brother Olsen explained are “the simple messages of the Restoration that anchor our identity . . . as Latter-day Saints—the reality of the First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the organization of the Church, for example.”

Today in upstate New York, families walk along paths through the Sacred Grove, imagining Joseph Smith kneeling among the low-lying ferns and sun-splashed leaves. In Missouri, Saints can tour a replica of Liberty Jail, where some of the most beloved parts of the Doctrine and Covenants, sections 121 to 123, originated as the Prophet Joseph Smith and others were subjected to many hardships.

“Places give people a really strong connection to the events of the Restoration of the gospel,” Sister Lund said. “There’s no substitute for being . . . in the very place and being able to imagine what happened there.”

Part of the power of those experiences comes from the veracity of the structures and settings found at the Church’s historic sites.

“We want to make it all as true to the experience as the message is,” Brother Olsen said. “A setting [often] can evoke a dimension of understanding about the First Vision or the Book of Mormon that can’t be achieved just by reading about it.”

Each log home, frame house, brick building, landscape, stone structure, and furnishing—including flooring, appliances, curtains, and other knickknacks—is exhaustively researched and re-created to be as true to the original as possible.

Artisans strive to match time period, region, economic status, and cultural forces present at that place and time, right down to the methods used historically to create each setting and object.

Brother Olsen said that he hopes that as people catch a glimpse of modern-day history, their knowledge of Church history will grow and their testimonies of the gospel will be strengthened. ■