

Interpretive Signage in the Urban Environment

Best Practices for Waysides Exhibits



Developed 2018 by the Baltimore National Heritage Area and adapted from
Wayside Exhibits: A Guide to Developing Outdoor Interpretive Exhibits
(National Park Service, 2009)

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An Introduction to Interpretive Signage (or “Do I Really Want to Install a Sign?”)

Since 2005, the Baltimore National Heritage Area has been in the sign business. BNHA is responsible for the interpretive signage along three urban heritage trails: Heritage Walk, Cultural Walk, and the Pennsylvania Avenue Heritage Trail. The heritage area has also taken stewardship of the “CHAP marker” program, used as historic site plaques on many of the city’s landmarks.

Well-written and well-designed interpretative signage can have many benefits in the community. Wayside exhibits (here used interchangeably with “interpretive signage”) can help illustrate a place’s importance in Baltimore history. Exhibits can encourage residents and visitors to learn more about stories and places, and ideally motivate people to proactively work to improve quality of life in their slice of town. In many cases, having an interpretive sign on a street corner or next to a beloved neighborhood building brings a strong sense of pride to a community.

The process for developing, crafting, and maintaining waysides and interpretive signs is complex. BNHA encourages those who are looking to create this signage to consider the following points:

- **Interpretive signage can be expensive.** Successful and effective signs can be costly. A wayside exhibit with a steel frame and laminated fiberglass panel can cost upwards of \$3,000 to \$5,000 each to fabricate and install. Writers and historians may need to be paid to develop the information on the panels. Professional graphic designers will need to lay out the text and images, and image rights may need to be acquired. Consider if other methods, such as web- or smartphone-based technologies, would be as effective.
- **It is difficult to gauge the impact of the signs.** Do people actually stop and read the signs? Are tens of people actually stopping? Hundreds? How can readership be measured?
- **Signs need consistent maintenance and cleaning.** Graffiti is certainly a concern in the urban environment. Will a sign maintenance plan be created? How often will the signs be checked for damage? If a sign is damaged, are funds in place to repair or replace the sign?
- **Signs are relatively permanent and are difficult to change.** We’ve all seen the changes in Baltimore. Old buildings come down, new ones go up. Office towers are converted to apartments, fire stations become brew pubs. This is typical of any built environment and presents challenges in creating interpretive signage. An average life span of a wayside exhibit is five to ten years. New technologies, whether a website or smartphone app, allow for quick changes to keep information up to date with just a few clicks and little cost. The permanence of the signs also makes it prohibitive to incorporate new methods in interpretation as well as new pieces of history.
- **Signs can add to the visual clutter of neighborhoods and raise safety concerns.** Does a neighborhood have narrow streets and busy foot traffic? Good wayside exhibits provide a safe space for readers to get out of foot-traffic and take a moment to look at a sign. In Fell’s Point, many residents feel that there is already too much interpretive signage, especially around Broadway Market.

BNHA does not want to discourage community groups and other organizations to pursue installing interpretive signage. The heritage area *does* want these groups to consider the many

steps necessary to creating successful interpretive signage. Installing this type of signage is just one avenue of expressing the importance of a site or neighborhood

This brief guide has been created to help organizations consider all the elements in the development of a wayside exhibit/interpretive signage program. The following pages explore what interpretation means in the context of signage design, best practices in content development and graphic design, and some advice on planning, budgeting, and installation.

What Is Interpretation?

“Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.”

— Freeman Tilden

Most people are familiar with language interpretation, either audibly between languages or visibly through a sign language interpreter. This type of interpretation is translating the meaning of one language into another.

Interpretation takes on a different context in the field of museums, parks, and historic sites. Interpreters in these fields “translate” the meanings of artifacts (and other physical objects, like buildings and monuments), landscapes, and historic events into a language that helps visitors understand these resources.

For an interpretive sign or exhibit, the sign’s text and graphics connect the interest of the reader with the meanings of resource(s). The meanings will better linger in the memory of the reader rather than details or facts. Consider a sign at a historic battleground: a good interpretive sign will illustrate why the battle was important turning point in the war, rather than expound upon the battle tactics that secured victory or ensured defeat. Interpretation hones in on the reader’s ultimate question: “Why should I care?”

Freeman Tilden of the National Park Service explored the theories behind interpretation. In his 1957 book *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tilden outlines six principles of interpretation:

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

The overall goal of any interpretive sign or wayside is to make the reader care about the site or resource. For those who make the connection, they are more likely to participate in preserving those resources so that future generations can enjoy them. When crafting the sign, determine what future action you want the reader to do. This is a critical piece of the exhibit planning process, explored later in this document.

Key Factors for Effective Wayside Signage

Creating interpretive signage for an urban environment presents a set of challenges different from signage in a “contained” environment, such as a national park. In a national park, like Fort McHenry, one can assume that the audience has an interest in learning about the subject matter that makes the place special.

NPS studies have shown that the average attention span for reading interpretive signage is between 30 to 45 seconds.

Considerations for Urban Interpretive Signage

- **Visitor Access.** Is the sign placed where people can comfortably gather without interrupting the flow of foot traffic? Is the sign a safe distance from vehicular traffic? Is the sign physically accessible to those with disabilities?
- **Compelling, Site-Specific Graphics.** Signage is of course a visual medium. Will the signage have interesting images that tell a story? Does the imagery connect to the significance of the site? Note that the wayside’s angle and position will direct the reader’s view. Is the direction appropriate for the sign’s subject matter?
- **Regular Maintenance.** Is there a plan (and funding) for regularly checking the sign for graffiti or other damage? Has a replacement schedule been considered? Outdoor signage typically needs replacement every five to ten years.

What Makes an Effective Wayside?

- Compelling graphics
- Appropriate direction of view
- Appropriate number of signs to convey messaging
- Attention-grabbing titles
- Active, succinct text that answers the question: “Why should I care?”

Wayside Development: Planning

Thoughtful and thorough planning will help ensure the signage development will proceed at an acceptable pace and achieve buy-in from all stakeholders. Consider the following planning steps when pursuing a scheme for interpretive signage.

Project Start-Up

1. *Establish the project team.*

Be as inclusive as possible when building the team who will carry out the signage project. In addition to the subject matter experts, writers, and designers, reach out to municipal agencies, such as the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation and the site owner. On public property, the owner can vary between the city's Department of Transportation, Department of Housing and Community Development, and Department of Recreation and Parks. The Baltimore National Heritage Area is also a good resource, as several interpretive signage projects are planned for historic neighborhoods in the city and could duplicate projects already under development.

2. *Prepare a list of potential waysides sites and subjects in conjunction with a site visit.*

3. *Determine costs and timeframe.*

Secure quotes for wayside production (research, writing and design), fabrication, and installation. Determine how the project will be funded and develop a timeframe for the project. Note that many grants require a funded project to be completed with a two-year timeframe.

4. *Begin preliminary research.*

A useful first step for any historic research project is a survey of documentation available through the National Register of Historic Places and the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties. The Maryland Historical Trust's online database provides a wealth of information; visit <https://mht.maryland.gov/secure/medusa/>.

Site Analysis

1. *Conduct the project start-up meeting.*

The start-up meeting should cover these items:

- Best practices in effective waysides and interpretive signage
- Timeline and process for sign development
- Concerns regarding sign accessibility and locations
- Signage structure (panel and base materials, size, etc.)
- Resources gathered and gaps
- Team roles and responsibilities

2. *Analyze proposed sign sites.*

- Visit potential sign sites with subject matter experts and relevant stakeholders (especially property owners)
- Identify site-specific significance and meaning
- Identify each sign's purpose, orientation to landscape, and site conditions
- Photograph potential sign locations and site-specific features

Project Proposal

1. Prepare the signage project proposal.

- Document the selected sign locations and purposes, display specifications (panel and base), and any graphic needs, such as maps or images.
- Create a site map of the proposed sign locations
- Develop a detailed cost estimate

2. Share the proposal with all stakeholders and secure agreement from all parties.

Considerations for Signage on Public Property

Signs Placed on Sidewalks

In Baltimore City, this generally falls under the jurisdiction of the city's Department of Transportation. Depending on the site, this might also fall under the jurisdiction of the city's Department of Housing and Community Development. Depending on the location, the department should be able to indicate their willingness to handle the installation or if coordination with the fabricator or another installer is necessary.

Signs Placed on Historic Properties and in Historic Districts

Changes to the exterior of Baltimore City Landmarks and to properties located with Baltimore City Historic Districts will need approval from the city's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation. In almost all cases, this is minor procedure, but is still mandated by city code.

Wayside Development: Writing

Best Practices in Writing Wayside Exhibits

1. **Write for the reader's benefit.** Explain why the reader should care about this place or this story. Can you help the reader understand something that cannot be seen?
2. **Keep it concise.** The average attention span is only 30 to 45 seconds. Be sure that your main point (why someone should care about this place or nugget of history) is conveyed in this timeframe.

In limited cases, a lengthier narrative could be included. Consider the location of the sign: a site near a bus stop or within a sheltered area (garden or park) might have a “captured audience” willing to spend more time delving into the subject matter.

3. **Keep it clear.** Avoid long words, jargon, and buzzwords. Use short, direct sentences and use active voice. For general audiences, write to an eighth-grade reading level.
4. **Use text hierarchies.** To help convey the main message within the short 45-second timeframe, consider using the most powerful concepts in the main body of the text. Other concepts and information can be presented in sidebars or in photo captions.

What to Avoid When Writing Wayside Exhibits

- **Subject titles.** The title of the exhibit should express the significance of the story. Don't just label, like “USS *Torsk*”—use a hook to pull someone into a story (“Heroes Under the Sea”).
- **Too much data.** A wayside is not a book, but rather a means to express a single story about why a place matters. Waysides are not good media for expressing complex stories.
- **Informing over interpreting.** Successful interpretive signage should provoke a response from the reader. The sign content should correspond to the desired outcomes and speak to the overall purpose of the signage plan.

Wayside Development: Designing

Best Practices in Designing Wayside Exhibits

1. **Focus through graphics.** A compelling singular image will attract attention. The title and main text should be aligned to enhance the focus of the main image.
2. **Visual layering.** With an average attention of 45 seconds, make sure the design has a clear focus and hierarchy. Consider a compelling title, single sentence main point, and secondary description with added details.
3. **Understand the limitations of designing outdoor signage.** Good contrast is necessary with changing lighting conditions. Avoid large areas of white that can cause glare under direct sunlight. Aim for neutral colors.

What to Avoid When Designing Wayside Exhibits

- **Too many colors and styles.** Visitors quickly scan wayside exhibits; rarely are they studied. Limit text, graphics, typefaces, and decorative elements. In general, use no more than three typefaces.
- **Too many small pictures.** Aim for a large image with just one or two smaller images. A wayside is not a guidebook.
- **Long lines and small text.** Understand that the sign reader is outdoors, perhaps standing, and might be experiencing not ideal weather. Clear typography is a must. Avoid long lines of text, and adjust leading (space between lines) to ease reading. For main text, aim for at least 20 points. (Captions can be smaller, but generally not less than 12 points.)

Should I use credit lines for images?

The National Park Service recommends avoiding using credit lines on images to prevent the sign design from becoming overly cluttered. Ideally, for each image used, a record will be made of the image source, rights agreements, etc. However, small organizations (especially volunteer-ran) may not have the capacity for recordkeeping.

As a general rule, the heritage area uses credit lines in its publications and signage. This provides an image source record for later staff. Each organization designing and installing signage should consider its operational structure and determine the best path for including credit lines.

Budgeting for an Interpretive Signage Program

Key Elements Addressed in a Sign Program Budget

The elements below are integral to a comprehensive budget required by many grant applications. Some of these services can be provided by staff or donated by individuals. This may be beneficial if a cash or in-kind match is required.

Content Creation

Historian	Cost per project or hour will vary depending on level of experience and complexity and size of project.
Writer/Interpretive Specialist	
Proofreader	

Layout and Design

Graphic Designer	Cost per project or hour will vary depending on level of experience and complexity and size of project. Hourly rates for professional designers begin around \$100 per hour.
Image Rights	Typically, these are not expensive to secure for one-time use in outdoor signage. Estimate a minimum \$200 in a proposed budget.

Fabrication and Installation

Fabrication	Costs vary based on type and size of sign.
Installation	Costs vary. The fabricator commonly does the sign installation. If the signage is going on public property, special considerations need to be made with appropriate city agencies.