HISTORIC WOODLAWN CEMETERY

Sustainability through Heritage Tourism

OVERVIEW

Students enrolled in FOLK 3375: Preserving Appalachian Culture at the Frank and Jane Gabor West Virginia Folklife Center collaborated with the Board of Trustees for the Historic Woodlawn Cemetery and the Marion County Convention & Visitors Bureau to design communication resources for the cemetery that will educate people about local history and allow visitors to explore the cemetery.

WHAT IS HERITAGE TOURISM?

Cultural heritage tourism is traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. In 2013, Mandala Research LLC reported that nearly 130 million adults annually engage in activities related to culture and history. These travelers tend to spend more per trip than the average leisure traveler. As an economic strategy, heritage tourism places the responsibility for the development of sites such as museums, battlegrounds, and cemeteries on the local community. It is the people who live in a community and know its history who have the capacity to make their communities into places people want to explore.

WHY WOODLAWN CEMETERY?

Started as a family cemetery in 1875, Historic Woodlawn houses 11,000 graves and is the final resting place of many people notable to West Virginia's history. During a period of prosperity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, renowned Pittsburgh-area landscape architect Tell W. Nicolet was employed to transform Woodlawn Cemetery into a lush and luxurious place of burial.

Over time, disputes over ownership of the cemetery led to neglect. In 2015, a citizen's group organized the Woodlawn Trustees and Board of Directors. By 2016, these groups were able to initiate fundraising for the cemetery, and by 2020, the superintendent's house and chapel had been refurbished and the grounds revitalized.

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WHAT WAS OUR PROCESS?

Step 1: Analyze Potential
We first considered the heritage assets within the nationally recognized cemetery including the tranquil setting, the superintendent's house and chapel, and the graves on notable figures including Governor Francis H. Pierpont, the governor of the "Restored Virginia." Additional assets are Woodlawn Cemetery's Board of Trustees, a group of devoted residents who oversee the care of the property, and the cemetery's proximity to the Marion County Courthouse and the Marion County Library with its genealogy research room. We also considered capacity and market which pose challenges for Woodlawn. While the Board of Trustees is an asset, the property is not staffed with on-site employees. This leaves visitors to explore the grounds unaided. Further, while Marion County has interesting historical and recreational sites, there are no large tourist attractions in the immediate area.

Step Two - Plan and Engage
Our analysis of the site brought us to determine the following criteria for the communication resources for the Woodlawn Cemetery. The resources should 1.) enhance the visitors' experience, 2.) be easily accessible without assistance, 3.) be easily replaced or changed, 4.) fit with the existing signage, 5.) Not detract from the location, 6.) Not interfere with the maintenance.

Step Three - Develop Authentically
Keeping the solemnity and dignity of Woodlawn intact is essential. This was reinforced when we announced this project on the Folklife Center's social media page. One local resident replied, "While I appreciate community involvement, as one who has family interred at Woodlawn Cemetery, be ever mindful that families purchased their lots as a quiet, final resting places, and be ever respectful of their dignity. Although it has several prominent Fairmont citizens buried there, families of the deceased never dreamed it would be 'marketed' for tourism." This post reinforced the need for careful, authentic development of the site.

WHAT IS OUR PRODUCT?

Our process led us to the conclusion that small, informational signs will enhance the visitors' experience. Each sign will include a QR code that connects to a two-minute audio story. These signs can be placed on existing poles or structures. If the QR code connection stops working, a new one can be created, and a sticker can be placed over the existing QR code. The signs are large enough to be readable, but small enough to be easily reprinted and replaced if they become damaged or obsolete.

Scan me!