

Have Shrine Will Travel: The Long and Wandering Road of the Ulysses S. Grant Birthplace

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In 1885, Michael Hirsch, owner of the "decayed" Point Pleasant, Ohio house where General Ulysses S. Grant had been born, was offered \$7,000 for the property (Cincinnati Enquirer, 1885). Though the sale never took place, the birthplace of the famous Civil War general and United States President, soon began a fifty year odyssey which is illustrative of the way in which our nation commemorated and memorialized its history and venerated its political and military figures, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article examines the history of the Grant birthplace as a vernacular dwelling, as a celebrated and romanticized traveling icon and shrine, as a destination for an increasingly automobile-oriented citizenry, and as a symbol of the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the historic preservation movement in America.

The Birth and the Birthplace

U. S. Grant's parents, Jesse Root and Hannah Simpson Grant arrived in Point Pleasant, a tiny Ohio River hamlet located approximately 25 miles upstream from Cincinnati, in 1821. Jesse was a tanner, and he had come to Point Pleasant to take charge of a tannery (tanyard) owned by Thomas Page. Upon arriving, the Grants rented a one story, three bay, timber-frame building, apparently constructed between 1817 and 1820, as a tannery worker or foreman's cottage. The tiny, austere, dwelling probably consisted of one large room, with a cooking fireplace, utensils and kitchen furniture on one side and a simple rope bed, chest, and cradle on the opposite side. It was here, on April 27, 1822, that U.S. Grant was born. The Grants remained in Point Pleasant just one year before moving to nearby Georgetown, where Jesse established a new and larger tannery (Bearss, 1984, 1).

The birthplace apparently remained relatively intact from 1823 to 1885, though there are conflicting accounts of its original configuration and construction. When historian Henry Howe visited the birthplace in 1885, he described it as a well-preserved one-story, two-room,

"humble domicile, 16 x 19 feet, with a steep roof, huge chimney, and very small window-panes" (Howe, 1896, 420-421); (Fig. 1). Another source describes the birthplace as "a strong frame house, covered with good full inch Allegheny pine, and containing two nice rooms with a cellar..." (Rockey, 1880). More recently, Daniel Porter, a former Director of the Ohio Historical Society, referred to the two-room floor plan as a later alteration, a concession to Victorian sentiments of privacy. Accordingly, the house was restored to its original one room configuration by the Ohio Historical Society, in 1966.



Fig. 1 When historian Henry Howe visited the birthplace in 1885, he described it as a well preserved one-story, two-room, "humble domicile, 16x19 feet, with a steep roof, huge chimney and very small window-panes." *Howe's Historical Collections of Ohio.*

The Log Cabin Myth

Early descriptions refer to the birthplace as a log cabin, though there has never been any evidence of logs or log construction during the various times the house was dismantled and moved. Such references probably originated in part with nineteenth century America's need to associate such humble dwellings with its great leaders. According to historian, Charles Hosmer, "cabins reflected the qualities that marked great men who rose from humble beginnings." Promoters soon realized that connecting famous Americans with

"carefully authenticated" log cabin births was also a profitable investment as a tourist attraction (Hosmer, 1965, 140). Also contributing to the Grant log cabin myth were the many memorial associations which sprang up after Grant's death. The U.S. Mint added to the legend in 1922, when it issued a half dollar depicting the birthplace as a log structure. Even today, newspaper articles and other publications occasionally refer to the house as a cabin.

"Preserving" the Birthplace

The context in which Grant's birthplace would be considered worthy of preservation, began to develop in the nineteenth century. As a new nation, the United States struggled to achieve a national identity. By the mid-nineteenth century this identity was increasingly based on the nation's past deeds and great men. The most visible physical reminders of such men were the buildings and structures associated with their births or with the most productive periods of their lives. No great man generated more patriotic fervor than George Washington. Though Newburgh, New York's, Hasbrouck House, one of Washington's numerous Revolutionary War headquarters, was purchased by the State of New York in 1850 in order to save it, (Murtagh, 1988, 28) the direction America's historic preservation movement was to take was to be defined not by government, but by private citizens. The prototype generally acknowledged for citizen involvement in preserving the nation's heritage, was of course Ann Pamela Cunningham's successful effort in 1853 to save Mount Vernon.

Cunningham's rescue of Washington's home is important for several reasons. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, of which Cunningham was the leader, served as a successful administrative model and became both an inspiration and a source of information for other early preservation efforts around the country. It acknowledged and defined the role of patriotic, affluent women specifically, and private citizens in general, not governments, as the appropriate advocates for historic preservation. Also, from the Mount Vernon experience grew the belief that buildings and sites were worthy of preservation solely because of their historic, military, or political associative value rather than for any intrinsic, aesthetic, or architectural significance, and that such sites were to be revered as shrines or icons. Not until the early twentieth century did Americans gain the perspective necessary to evaluate historic buildings as worthy of preservation in their own right. This narrow vision of what should be preserved was to influence both the nature and scope of efforts to preserve Grant's birthplace (Murtagh, 1988, 30-31).

The Marketing of Grant

Inquiries into the purchase and preservation of Grant's birthplace began immediately after his death. Shortly after the New York offer, the birthplace was moved by towboat from Point Pleasant to Cincinnati and leased for the 100 day celebration of the Ohio Valley Centennial, despite opposition from some Clermont County and Point Pleasant citizens, who feared the house would never be returned. A small fee was charged to view the birthplace and the owner, Michael Hirsch, who had turned down the earlier New York offer to purchase the house, received one-fourth of the exhibition's proceeds. In 1887, Congressman John Little of Ohio proposed that the federal government acquire the birthplace, but action was never taken (Little, 1887).

The 100th anniversary of the settlement of the Northwest Territory, a year later, was the occasion for the second moving of the birthplace. While viewing the house on exhibit at the Centennial Exposition, Columbus entrepreneur, Henry T. Chittenden, "a friend and admirer of Grant," and William F. Burdell, having concluded it was inappropriate to use the birthplace for commercial purposes, purchased the house for \$3,000 and relocated it to Columbus' Goodale Park, "for permanent preservation as a historic shrine" (Shetrone, 1937, 104). During a Grand Army of the Republic national encampment that year, thousands of Civil War veterans filed reverently through the birthplace, imbuing it with shrine-like status.

Efforts also were made to furnish the house with Grant memorabilia. The house eventually became the repository for a plethora of objects, most of which were associated with Grant's adult life. The birthplace did not reside in Columbus for long. Capitalizing on its increasing sentimental and perhaps economic value, the new owners apparently had a change of heart. During the early 1890s, the birthplace went on a tour of the nation, before being moved to the State Fairgrounds in Columbus, where it became a featured attraction.

Moving Historic Buildings

Moving buildings had been a fairly common practice in the United States, since the late 18th century. Scottish Civil Engineer, David Stevenson was so fascinated with the American phenomenon of house moving, that he included an entire chapter on the subject in his 1838 book, *Sketch of the Civil Engineering of North America* (Curtis, 1979, 1,3). There was also a contemporary precedence from which those involved in moving Grant's birthplace may have drawn inspiration, the dismantling and moving of Lincoln's birthplace. In fact, there are many similarities between the Lincoln and Grant birthplaces. Like Grant's birthplace, the log cabin where Lincoln was

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born was dismantled, moved, and exhibited several times between 1860 and 1906, and like the birthplace, it was eventually installed in a building designed to protect it from the elements, a neo-classical Greek Temple, designed by John Russell Pope in 1911 (Peterson, 1968).

"An Enduring Tasteful Dome of Glass"

By the time Grant's birthplace was returned to Columbus in 1896, nearly a decade of exposure to the elements and throngs of visitors had taken its toll. Alarmed about its physical condition (Ohio Board of Agriculture, 1888, 8), state officials erected a glass and limestone pavilion to enclose and protect the building (Fig. 2). The Grant Memorial Building was dedicated September 3, 1896, at a ceremony attended by Governor Bushnell (*Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1922, 289).

With the moving, dismantling, and lengthy exhibition of the Grant birthplace, doubts about its authenticity began to surface. Speaking at the dedication of the Memorial Building, birthplace benefactor, Henry Chittenden attempted to respond to these concerns and to substantiate the legitimacy of the birthplace. He noted that before purchasing the building, testimony and affidavits were taken regarding its authenticity and sketches were made of its actual appearance so that it could be reproduced. Chittenden also acknowledged a letter



Fig. 2 Alarmed about its physical condition, state officials erected a glass and limestone pavilion to enclose and protect the birthplace. Ohio Historical Society, Archives Library Division.

from Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant, in which she validated the above claims. He further noted that extreme care was taken each time the building was moved to minimize the impact on original building fabric (*Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1922, 291). Nevertheless, the evidence suggests the integrity of the building declined.

By the early 1900s "architecturally motivated" preservation and a growing interest in the educational value of historic sites began to take root. Chief among those holding the new preservation philosophy was William Sumner Appleton, whose Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) was among the first organizations to promote the aesthetics of architecture as a justification for preservation (Murtagh, 1988, 79-82). In the 1920s and early 1930s restorations at Colonial Williamsburg, Greenfield Village, and Old Sturbridge Village helped make the nation more aware of its heritage and served as prototypes for museum-oriented preservation for public purposes.

"Shrine of a Nation's Idol"

Despite the increasingly enlightened approaches to preserving the nation's heritage, the patriotism that had always motivated America's preservation movement sustained itself into the early years of the twentieth century. In fact, it was the public's continuing patriotic fervor that contributed to the growing shrine-like stature of Grant's birthplace and the homes of other political and military figures. One indication of the continuing veneration and esteem heaped upon Grant was the extent to which the site of the birthplace continued to attract visitors. Despite its isolation and the lack of good roads, aging Civil War veterans and others continued to make pilgrimages to Point Pleasant. Though another house had by now been built on the site, a Civil War cannon and plaque ("tablet") dedicated to the memory of Grant were installed in 1907 (*Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1909, 382).

The people of Point Pleasant had long advocated the return of the birthplace and the centennial of Grant's birth in 1922 accelerated their efforts. A U.S. Grant State Memorial Association was created and a Grant Centenary Commission was appointed by the Governor. Clermont County native, Hugh Nichols, former Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court and Chairman of the Grant Centenary Celebration Committee, is credited with spearheading the effort to bring the birthplace home.

The nearly impassable road leading to Point Pleasant, had long been used as an argument against returning the birthplace to its original site. In February 1922, Congress finally responded to the problem, approving the creation and sale of Grant memorial gold

dollars and silver half-dollars, with part of the proceeds to be used to improve a five mile stretch of the road from New Richmond to Moscow, passing through Point Pleasant. (*Congressional Record-Senate*, 1922, 1557-1558). The link between the road and the birthplace were further strengthened in 1927 with construction of the Grant Memorial Bridge over Indian Creek. The Parker through truss span was given "special architectural treatment" as a memorial to Grant, with decorative stone pylons and cannons. The bridge was also built in part from the sale of Grant dollars and half-dollars (*State of Ohio*, 1928, 156; *Cincinnati Times Star*, 1927). The road gained further attention in 1928, when a congressional committee on post roads and post offices designated it as part of a proposed Atlantic to Pacific Highway (U.S. Congress, 1928). To call further attention to the deplorable road conditions and to raise funds for improvements, a Grant Memorial Highway Association was established. For a donation of one dollar Association members received a certificate featuring a likeness of their hero (Fig. 3). Proceeds from the sale of Association memberships, along with state and local funds and labor, helped finance the reconstruction of the highway (Grant Memorial Highway Association, n.d.).

The centennial celebration of Grant's birth, held in Point Pleasant, April 27, 1922, focused national attention on Grant and the plight of the birthplace. Standing on a platform near the birthplace site, President Warren G. Harding spoke into a Bell Loud Speaker, delivering his oration in the presence of nearly 30,000 people while it was simultaneously broadcast to a similar number at Cincinnati's Lytle Park, marking one of the earliest uses of the recently developed technology of electronic voice amplification (*The Cincinnati Bell Telephone Bulletin*, 1922, 67; Carr, 1922, 13).

In November, 1925, the Grant Centenary Commission acquired its first parcel of property in Point Pleasant. In January, 1926, the State of Ohio began acquiring several lots, including the property where the birthplace had stood. A Grant Memorial Park was established. In 1932, the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society (now the Ohio Historical Society) assumed official responsibility for administering Grant Memorial State Park (Ohio Historical Society, 1935). In May, 1935, the Ohio legislature authorized and directed the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society to move the birthplace from the state fairgrounds to Point Pleasant (Ohio House Bill, 1935). The Grant birthplace was among the first historic sites in Ohio acquired by the state.

In March, 1936, the birthplace was dismantled in sections and shipped in six trucks to Point Pleasant, where it was stored in a barn. The two-story frame house which had occupied the site since the 1880s was moved to another lot, and the birthplace was reconstructed

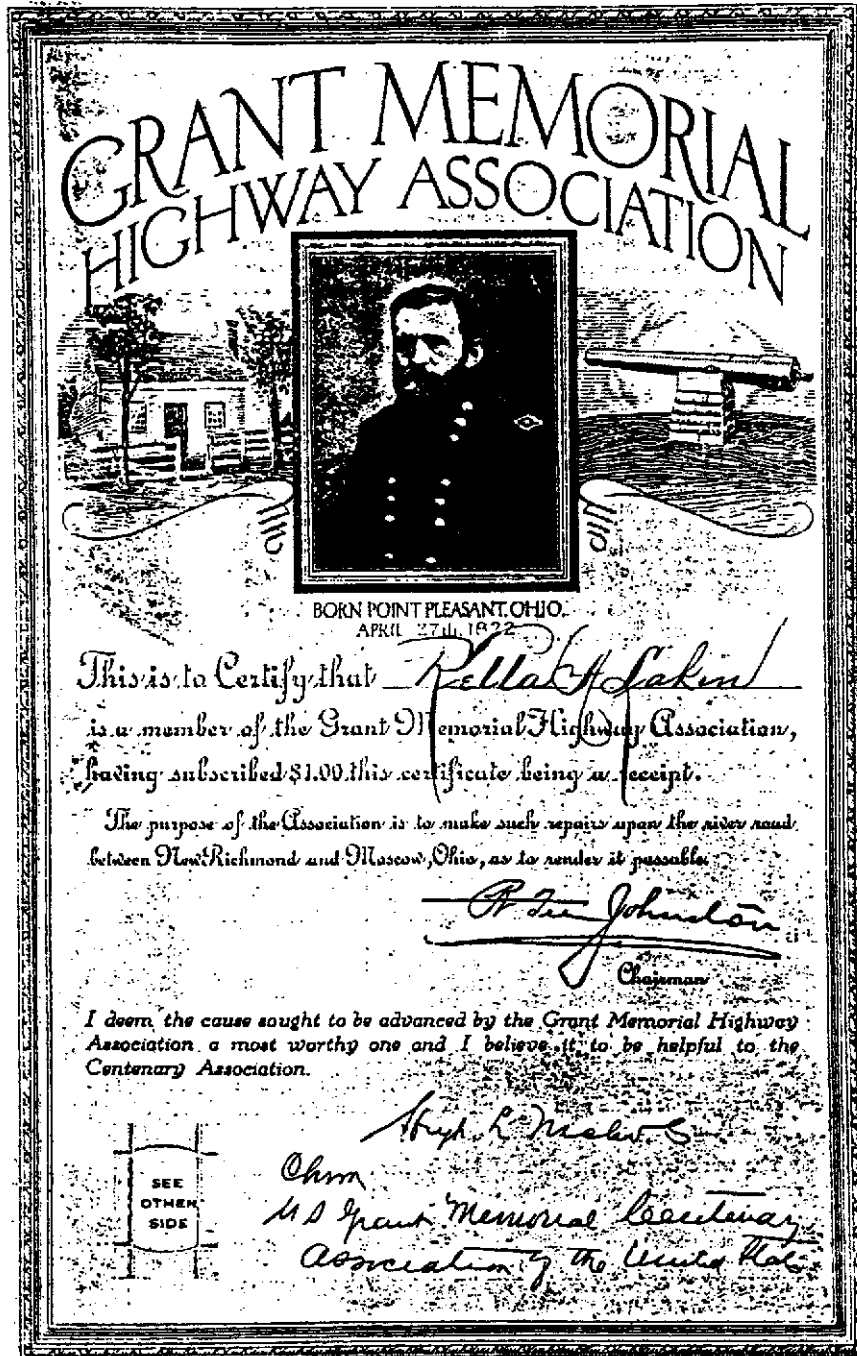


Fig. 3 To call attention to the deplorable road conditions and to raise funds for improvements, a Grant Memorial Highway Association was established. For a donation of one dollar, Association members received a certificate featuring a likeness of their hero, Grant Birthplace State Memorial.

on the original stone foundation. However, the evidence suggests that much of the original fabric of the birthplace was replaced during the reconstruction. One contemporary account noted it was impossible to return the original house intact. However, through the efforts of Judge Nichols, an accurate replica was apparently constructed. A description of the birthplace written in 1941 reported, "The house as it now stands is an exact replica of the house in which President Grant was born" (Ohio Historical Society, n.d.). Establishing the authenticity of any of the building's remaining original fabric, however, is conjectural, since no detailed field notes or reconstruction specifications have been located.

In a fitting conclusion to the convoluted history of the birthplace, a dedication ceremony marking its return and "restoration" was held October 4, 1936 (Shetrone, 1937, 103). However, assaults on Grant's birthplace did not end with its return to Point Pleasant. Located on the Ohio River flood plain, the hamlet experiences periodic flooding. The great Ohio River flood of 1937 was particularly devastating, with water reaching the eaves of the house (*Rhiannon Publications*, 1997). Federal flood relief totaling \$1000 was spent making repairs to the birthplace. A year later the Works Progress Administration (WPA) made significant improvements to the park, including a series of stone retaining walls, sidewalks, and street gutters (Demaray, 1936; McGlaun, 1937; *Cincinnati Times Star*, 1937; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 1938).

A "Good Road" to the Birthplace

It is no coincidence that the growing effort to return Grant's birthplace to Point Pleasant and to improve highway access to the isolated hamlet corresponded with the invention and democratization of the automobile and the lobbying interests promoting federal involvement in highway construction, which became known as the "Good Roads Movement." Charles Duryea introduced his "motor carriage" in 1896, the year the glass and stone Grant Memorial Building was dedicated. The first automobile show in America was held in 1900 and by 1903, the magazine *Outing* carried articles about the rediscovery of America by automobile. In 1908, just one year after Ohio Governor Harris and other dignitaries traveled to Point Pleasant to dedicate the cannon and memorial plaque to Grant, Henry Ford introduced his moderately priced Model-T to thousands of eager owners. The public was ready to take to the highways, but most highways were not ready for them. In fact, like the road to Point Pleasant, most roads were in a deplorable condition (Hugill, 1982, 327, 334; Paxson, 1946, 238; Jordan, 1948, 300). Chief among the organizations promoting better roads was the National Highway

Association, which favored a system of national highways built and maintained at federal expense. Improved roads, they believed, would bring money and prosperity to local areas (Davis, 1914, 2-4).

Ironically, as automobile travel grew, visitors to Grant's birthplace declined. Despite road improvements, Point Pleasant was still "off the beaten path." In addition, with the passing of those with strong physical and emotional ties to the nineteenth century conflagration that elevated Grant to heroic status, the birthplace was no longer viewed as a shrine and became just another house museum. The Ohio Historical Society continued to maintain the property. In 1953, a caretaker's cottage was acquired and in 1966 minor restoration work was conducted. Nevertheless, declining numbers of tourists led to lean times. During the 1980s, the Ohio Historical Society reduced hours, personnel, and maintenance at the site (Erardi, 1981). Today, the U.S Grant State Memorial is managed by a part-time curator/caretaker who oversees the property and opens it to visitors (Fig. 4). The birthplace was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, August 6, 1998, as a part of the U.S. Grant Birthplace and Grant Commemorative Sites Historic District.

The history of efforts to commemorate the life of U. S. Grant now



Fig. 4 Today, the U.S. Grant Memorial is managed by a part-time curator/caretaker who oversees the property and opens it to visitors. Photo by Glenn A. Harper (1997).

transcend his birthplace. Whatever its value as a historic structure, the Grant birthplace has become a significant commemorative monument, a major element of Grant iconography and perhaps most important, an excellent example of the nation's slow, sometimes curious, but steady endeavor to recognize and preserve its heritage.

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