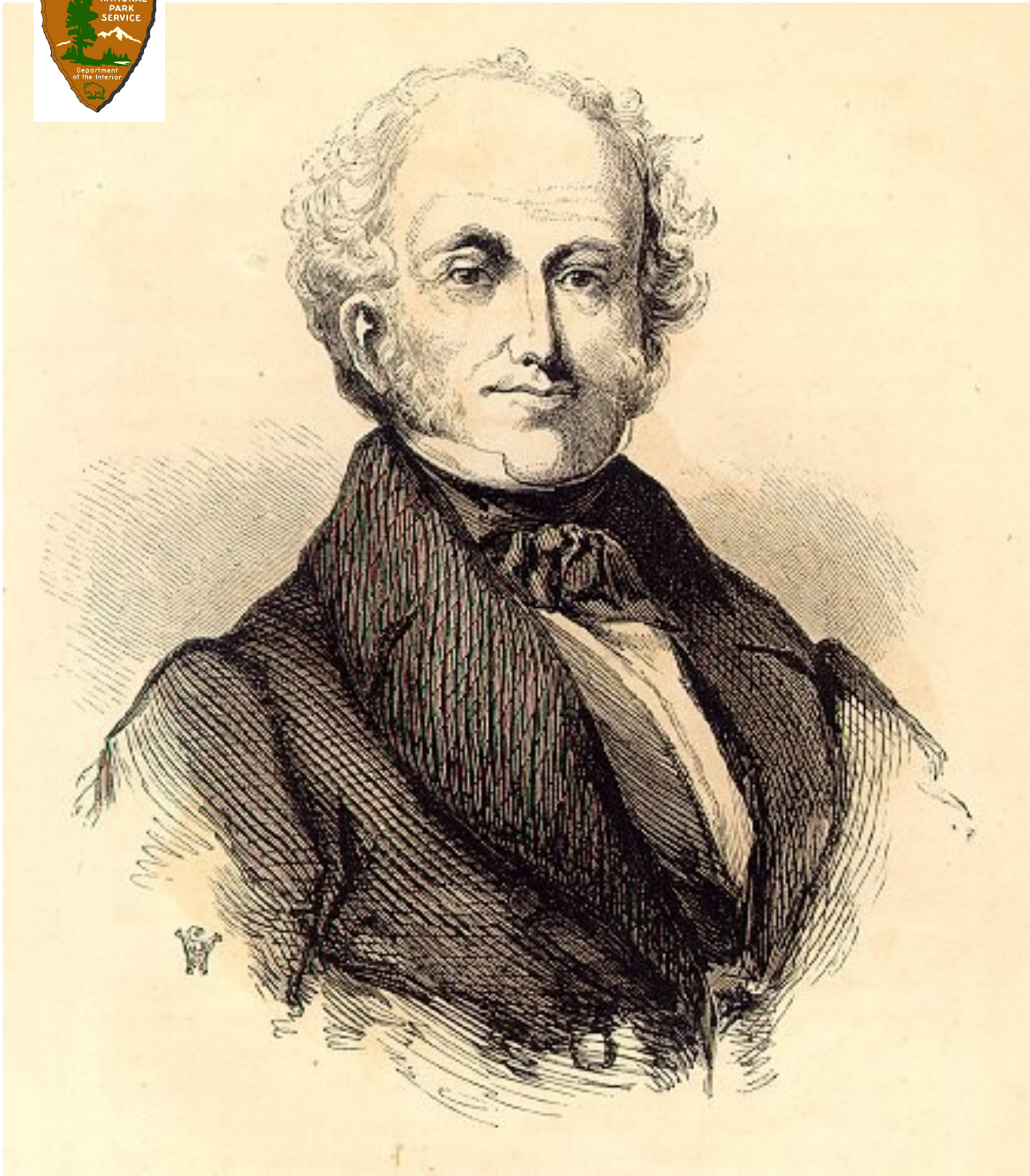




**INTERPRETIVE PLANNING FOUNDATION**



**MARTIN VAN BUREN NATIONAL  
HISTORIC SITE**

**NEW YORK  
2003**

# Introduction

Martin Van Buren National Historic Site was established in 1974 to commemorate the life and work of the eighth president of the United States. The park preserves 22 acres of the original 250-acre estate in Kinderhook NY owned and occupied by Van Buren from the end of his presidency in 1841 to his death in 1862. Park management is guided by a master plan that was written in 1972, before the park was established. The park is expecting to embark on a General Management Planning (GMP) process in 2004-2005 that, among other issues, will consider the need for a major boundary expansion that would enlarge the site to include most of the acreage of the farm that Van Buren owned and managed. The GMP will also address the park's primary interpretive themes and the need for any new visitor facilities.

The park has struggled with how to interpret Van Buren and his significance in the context of the physical resource at hand: his house and a portion of the farm. The existing visitor experience is primarily a guided interpretive tour of the house. It is often difficult to effectively interpret Van Buren's historical and political significance using the tangible resources – furniture and a house. The interpretive division has been operating under an outdated interim interpretive prospectus that was approved in 1985. This prospectus lists topics that do not effectively guide park staff and managers in developing their interpretive programs and facilities. Park staff began developing their interpretive themes in 2001 with a staff meeting and public meeting with Friends of Lindenwald facilitated by Sue Pridemore. The resulting draft themes then received scholarly review by: Donald Coe, author of *Martin Van Buren and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, 1984); John Brooke of Ohio State University, early national historian and author of a forthcoming book on Martin Van Buren; John Marszalek, noted antebellum historian and author of *The Petticoat Affair*; and Herbert Parmet, Emeritus, CUNY, a scholar of the presidency. The draft themes from this 2001 effort formed the basis for the themes in this document.

The GMP will define the visitor experience and interpretive offerings of the park for the next 20 years. Park staff determined it was necessary to do some interpretive and visitor experience planning - the foundation portion of a Long Range Interpretive Plan - ahead of the GMP effort, and contracted a Harpers Ferry Center Interpretive Planner to facilitate a short interpretive planning foundation workshop. It was agreed that the results of that workshop – including park purpose statements, significance statements, interpretive themes, visitor experience goals, and audiences - would inform the GMP. This workshop also attempted to identify some of the management issues and questions impacting interpretation and visitor experience that the team felt should be answered by the GMP. Once the GMP process has chosen a preferred alternative, the park will complete the rest of the Long Range Interpretive Plan. This document is a result of that 2-day interpretive planning workshop, which included park staff and stakeholders, that took place at the park on June 16 and 17, 2003.

## Purpose

A park purpose statement summarizes the reasons a particular park or park unit was included in the National Park System. It is based on the unit's legislative mandate and on NPS policies. The purpose statement is the most fundamental criteria against which the appropriateness of all recommendations, operational decisions, and actions for the site are to be tested.

Planning focuses first on why a park was established and what conditions should exist there before delving into details about specific actions.

- The purpose of Martin Van Buren National Historic Site is to interpret the life and times of Martin Van Buren, the 8<sup>th</sup> US president, through the preservation of Lindenwald, his home and farm.

## Significance

Significance statements help define and describe the site's importance to the nation's natural and cultural heritage. Their purpose is to help managers make decisions that preserve the resources and values necessary to the park's purposes. The following significance statement describes why Martin Van Buren NHS has national significance:

- Lindenwald reflects the life and times of eighth US president Martin Van Buren, a prominent antebellum politician who helped shape the American political party system in its formative years and during the turbulent era preceding the civil war.

## Interpretive Themes

Primary interpretive themes are those ideas or concepts that every visitor should understand. They are the key ideas through which the park's nationally significant resource meanings are conveyed to the public. These themes will provide the foundation for interpretive programs and media at the park. The themes do not include everything we may wish to interpret, but rather the ideas that are critical to a visitor's understanding of the park's significance. All interpretive efforts should relate to one or more of the themes and each theme should be addressed in the overall interpretive program.

Wisdom is not knowledge of many things, but the perception of the underlying unity of seemingly unrelated facts. -John Burnet

These themes have been numbered for easy reference; this numbering does not indicate any kind of prioritization. Below the theme statement are some ideas of the kinds of topics that would fall under that theme.

**1) Martin Van Buren's experiences at Lindenwald illuminate the struggles of America's 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of political leaders as they contended with the sectionalism that led to the Civil War.**

- Right to vote
- Rise of the "common man"
- Land ownership
- Abolitionism and slavery
- Mexican war/ US expansion
- States' rights

**2) Martin Van Buren was a primary architect of the current political party system that continues to shape American political life.**

- Professional politician
- Workings of the constitutional government
- Albany regency
- Affiliation with various parties

**3) The Lindenwald farm was a reflection of the social and economic issues influencing Van Buren's life.**

- Market economy
  - Mass immigration
  - Men and women
  - North/South divisions
  - Agricultural technology
-

- Mass production
- Religion
- Van Buren's relation to Kinderhook
- Importance of Lindenwald to Van Buren

## Visitors and Audiences

Martin Van Buren National Historic Site received approximately 17,000 visits in 2002. Park staff conducts an ongoing informal visitor observation program, which indicates that most visitors (94%) are first time visitors, most are middle aged adults (70%), most are in family groups (30%), and most are from the New England/New York region (50%).

The following list of current and potential visitor groups and audiences is based on staff observations. The groupings are generalizations and are meant only to give an idea about park audiences and visitors. Many individual visitors will fall into more than one category or outside the categories listed. Special populations are a part of all of these audiences.

**Hudson Valley visitors** – The site is a part of the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area which contains a wide range of publicly and privately owned and managed historical, cultural and recreational resources. Many visitors who come to the site are doing so as part of a general visit to the Hudson River Valley. This group includes visitors of a wide variety of ages, and a relatively small percentage of international visitors.

**Special interest groups** - This group includes visitors who come to the site because they have a particular interest in a particular subject matter such as presidential houses, period furniture, or antique houses.

**National Park Service destination visitors** – Some visitors come to the site specifically because it is a part of the National Park System and/or they want their National Park Service passport stamped.

**Local residents** – This group comes to the park in relatively small numbers, usually with out of town visitors or for special events.

**Special event attendees** – These visitors, mainly local, come to the park specifically for a special event.

**Recreational/after-hours visitors** – Some visitors use the park for recreational purposes such as dog-walking, picnicking or cross country skiing, or to walk the grounds especially if they arrive when the house and visitor center are closed.

**School children** - School groups from the region visit the park but have been decreasing in number. Factors that may influence this trend include school funding, staffing levels, and the season which the park is open.

**General non-visiting public (virtual visitors)** – Many residents of the United States or the world at large may never visit Martin Van Buren NHS for economic, accessibility, geographical, or other reasons. However they may still have an interest in information about the site and its resources and themes, and may enjoy armchair visits to the site.

## Visitor Experience Goals

Visitor experience goals describe what physical, intellectual, and emotional experiences should be available to visitors who come to Martin Van Buren National Historic Site. These experiences will be available to visitors of all abilities, including those with visual, auditory, mobility or cognitive impairments.

“Visitor experience” is what visitors take from a park. It is everything that visitors do, sense, feel, think, and learn. Interpretive planning describes desired visitor experiences and recommends ways to facilitate those experiences.

### Visitors to Martin Van Buren NHS will have opportunities to:

- have a rural experience.
- find the park easily.
- realize they are in a National Park unit.
- connect with the genuine artifacts of Martin Van Buren (the real thing).
- see and enjoy the cultural landscape that Martin Van Buren knew.
- find a meaningful educational experience independently if so desired.
- want to visit the site repeatedly.
- learn the park themes in a variety of ways.
- have a quality experience regardless of ability.
- acquire information onsite to take home to enhance their visit.
- have a safe and comfortable visit.
- speak with a representative of the National Park Service.
- learn about the park without visiting the site.

## **GMP-issues Affecting Interpretation**

The planning team identified the following issues as GMP-level issues that need to be addressed before a Long Range Interpretive Plan can be completed.

Are new visitor facilities necessary, and if so where and what type?

How and where can the primary interpretive themes that have been identified be told if they do not lend themselves to house tours?

How can a quality visitor experience be offered to visitors when the site is closed?

What kinds of visitor use are appropriate on the farm and where?

How should the viewshed and cultural landscape be managed for quality interpretive and visitor experiences?

What kinds of recreational use of the site is appropriate and where?

What is the carrying capacity of the park resources?

What issues/threats are there that could interfere with the visitor experience?

How can partnerships with neighboring communities and similar institutions be strengthened?



## **Immediate Interpretive Issues**

The Long-Range Interpretive Plan will not be completed until after the GMP has selected a preferred alternative, which is several years away. In the meantime, the park staff will begin to implement the draft interpretive themes. Another immediate issue facing interpretation is what to do when the house is closed for major repairs, something that is anticipated to occur in the next year during a HVAC project. Some ideas brainstormed by the group included:

Temporary offsite exhibits of artifacts from the house

A lecture series

Tours of outside of house/grounds

Complete and install the planned wayside exhibits

Develop a self-guided walking tour of the site

Create a CD-ROM providing virtual visit

Present interpretive programs related to the “fix up a house” theme

Develop and present a media event about the work being done to the house

## **Workshop participants**

### **National Park Service - Martin Van Buren NHS**

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Karen Leffingwell  
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Jim McKay  
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Patricia West McKay

### **National Park Service – Harpers Ferry Center**

Kate Hammond, Interpretive Planner

### **Park Partners**

Richard Anderson, Friends of Lindenwald  
Reneta Benenati, Friends of Lindenwald  
Les Burns, Friends of Lindenwald  
John Pickett, Friends of Lindenwald  
Roland Vosburgh, Columbia County  
Glenn Wallace, Friends of Lindenwald  
Bob Worsfold, Friends of Lindenwald