

# Visitor Guide



Vesterheim  
The National Norwegian-American  
Museum & Heritage Center



# What to See in an Hour

If you are short on time, you won't want to miss these standouts on any Vesterheim tour, but fair warning: There will be a lot of other wonderful things on the way that may distract you.



1 Norwegian House  
1st floor, *The Home in Norway*



2 The TradeWind  
1st floor, *The Atlantic Crossing*



3 The White Birches  
1st floor, *The Atlantic Crossing*



4 The Selland House  
2nd floor, *The Home in America*



5 Refrigerator Rosemaling  
2nd floor, *The Home in America*



6 Chip-Carved Bowl  
2nd floor, *Wood and Its Decoration*



7 Viking-style Drinking Horn  
2nd floor, *Wood and Its Decoration*



8 Bridal Crown  
2nd floor, *Silver*



9 Wise & Foolish Virgins  
3rd floor, *Textiles*



10 The 99th Infantry Battalion  
Basement, *Military Exhibitions*



11 Lars Christenson Altarpiece  
Basement, *Church Gallery*



12 Open Air Division  
Open from May 1 to October 31.  
Guided tours daily at 1:30 p.m.

# Welcome to Vesterheim!

Vesterheim is *the* national Norwegian-American museum and heritage center, with over 24,000 artifacts, 12 historic buildings, a Folk Art School, and a library and archives. This treasure showcases the most extensive collection of Norwegian-American artifacts in the world.

Vesterheim's exhibitions explore the diversity of American immigration through the lens of the Norwegian-American experience and highlight the best in historic and contemporary Norwegian folk and fine arts. *USA Today* named Vesterheim one of "ten great places in the nation to admire American folk art."

But you don't have to be Norwegian-American to enjoy all the beauty and wonder that Vesterheim has to offer. We invite you to explore the ongoing saga of all immigrants to the United States. In our differences we discover our similarities. Vesterheim welcomes you and encourages you to enjoy the objects and exhibitions through your own lens, your own story.

## Museum History

In 1877, Norwegian Americans began collecting and preserving objects at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, documenting their chapter of the immigrant story, making them pioneers in the preservation of cultural diversity in America.

That early collection has grown into one of the most comprehensive museums in the United States dedicated to a single immigrant group—Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, which is now an independent not-for-profit organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM).

## Membership

To find out more about all the great benefits you'll receive with your affordable Vesterheim membership, ask any museum staff member for a Membership Brochure, or visit our website, [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org).

## Folk Art School

Vesterheim offers a wide range of courses in rosemaling, woodcarving & woodworking, textile arts, knifemaking, and food traditions. For more information and a complete list of classes, visit us online.

On the web at [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org)



## Museum

### Museum Hours

Open daily

*May 1 to October 31:* 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

*November 1 to April 30:* 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

### Admission Prices

Museum members - free

Adults - \$10

Ages 7-18 - \$5

Seniors 65+ - \$8

### Free First Thursdays

Free admission and a special event on the first Thursday of each month.

## Museum Store

Located in the Westby-Torgerson Education Center, offering Scandinavian-inspired clothing and gifts and a wide range of folk-art supplies. Membership discounts on most items.

### Museum Store Hours

Open daily all year: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

## Holidays

*Both the museum and store are closed*

*Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day,*

*New Year's Day, and Easter.*

## Photography

You may take non-flash photos throughout the museum complex for personal, noncommercial use only, and we encourage you to share your favorite shots on Facebook, Flickr, TripAdvisor, Yelp, and other social networking sites.

*All flash photography is prohibited and commercial use of images of Vesterheim's collections or grounds is strictly forbidden without prior written consent.*

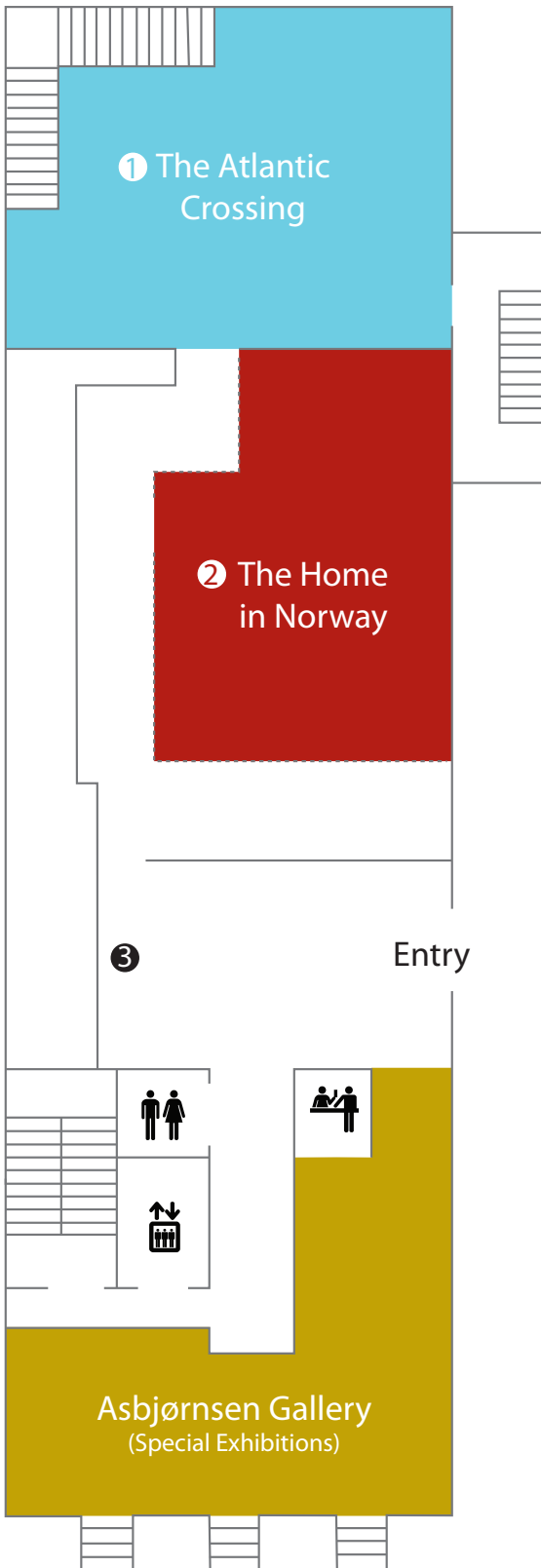
## Open Air Division

Twelve historic buildings located behind the Main Building, open from May 1 to October 31. Guided tours daily at 1:30 p.m., included with admission. If you aren't able to take the guided tour, it is worth wandering the grounds and reading the signs outside each building.

## Accessibility

The Main Building, Westby-Torgerson Education Center, Amdal-Odland Heritage Center, and Bethania Church are wheelchair accessible, but some historic buildings in the Open Air Division are not. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please let us know if any member of your party requires special accommodation or assistance.

This Vesterheim *Visitor Guide* is made possible through the generosity of  
Wayne and Dorothy Johnson.



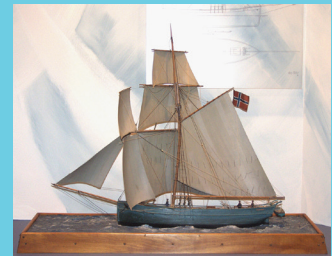
## First Floor

### 1 The Atlantic Crossing



The *TradeWind* is 25 feet long and carried two brothers from Norway to the United States in 1933.

The sloop *Restauration* (below), was 54 feet long, just over twice the size of the *TradeWind*, yet it carried 53 immigrants, who were the first organized group to sail from Norway to the United States in 1825.



This is a *færing*, a boat used for errands and small journeys along the Norwegian coast line. They were regularly used into the 1950s and 1960s.



## First Floor

### ② The Home in Norway



The Norwegian House represents a landowner's home in Norway.



This beautiful trunk was used for storage and as luggage.



An *ambar* was used for serving *rømmegrøt*, a cream porridge, at special occasions.

### ③ Fjord Mural



Make sure you take a photograph standing in front of this entry-way mural—something many Vesterheim visitors like to do. Erik P. Petri painted the original artwork in 1904.

## Leaving Home

The story of Norwegian immigrants is just one of many stories that make up the ongoing adventure of immigration to the United States. The experiences of Norwegian immigrants during the 1800s and 1900s weren't very different from those of other immigrants during that time period, or even of today. Like others, they hoped to escape difficult circumstances, desired better opportunities, and longed for more freedoms. Once here, they struggled with hardship, prejudice, the challenges of negotiating American ways, and the choices associated with deciding who they were as individuals and within their communities.

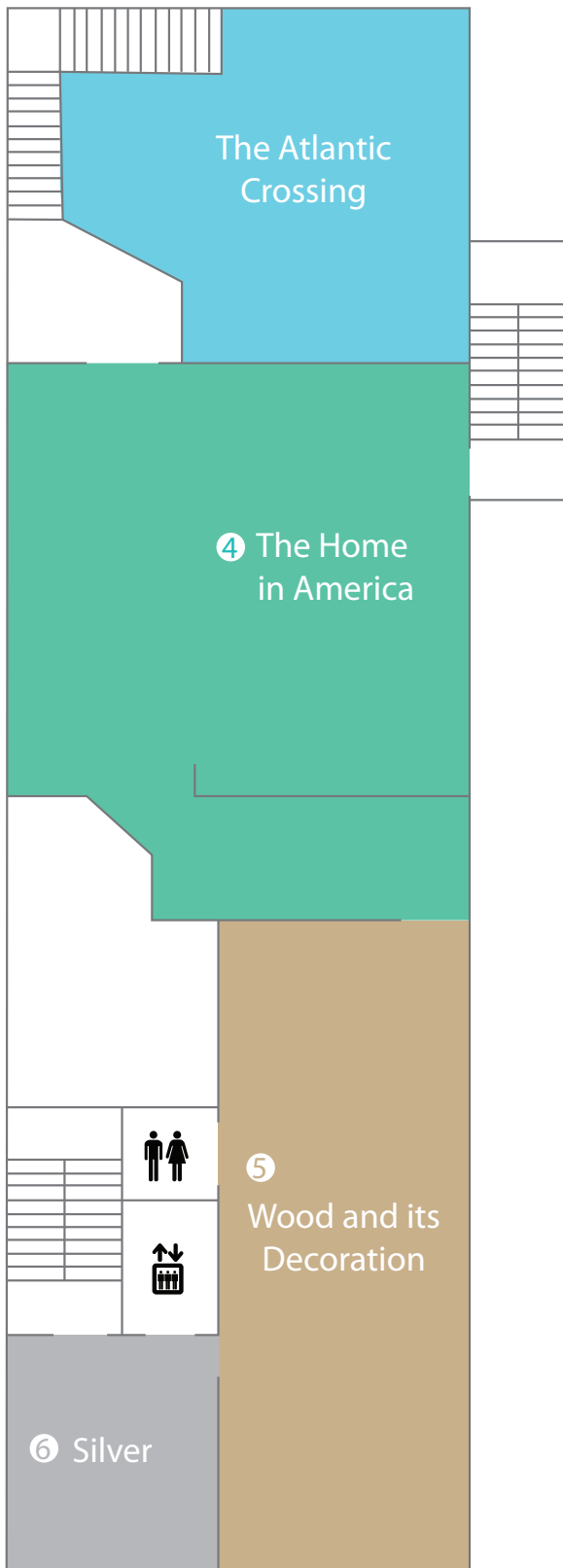
*You are leaving your home to move to a new country. You have one trunk in which to pack your belongings. You cannot take everything with you. What do you choose to take? What is necessary to furnish your home, clothe you, or help you get a job? What is essential for you to maintain your traditions?*

Traditions like songs, beliefs, and recipes are carried in people's minds and hearts and do not take up luggage space, but these traditions often find tangible expression, too. Norwegian emigrants packed objects in their trunks that helped them voice, maintain, and share their traditions.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, most emigrants arrived in the United States by ship. Whether by sailing ship or steamship, the journey for emigrants could be crowded and lacking many of the conveniences of life on dry land.

*Think about your daily routine (sleeping, cooking, eating, bathing, washing). How might you do these things onboard a ship for seven days or seven weeks?*

View a sample of Vesterheim's collection online at [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org).



## Second Floor

### 4 The Home in America



This house was the third home for the Erick and Anna Selland family. In 1852 they settled in Madison, Wisconsin, near friends and relatives. In 1853, they moved to land north of Decorah, Iowa, near a cousin who helped Erick saw the logs for this house.



This cupboard dates from 1834 and is decorated with Gudbrandsdal-style rosemaling. It is the type of item that often had to be left in Norway.

### 5 Wood and Its Decoration



This ale bowl, or *kjenge*, has horse-head handles and was used for drinking beer at festive occasions.

## Second Floor

### 5 Wood and Its Decoration



The *kubbestol*, or log chair, evolved from a functional piece of furniture in peasant homes to a decorative status symbol in Norwegian-American homes.

### 6 Silver



Long ago Norwegians thought silver could ward off evil. This brooch, or *sølje*, was worn both for decoration and protection. For immigrants, these brooches also communicated ethnic identity and cultural pride.

## Building a New Life In America

Many Norwegian immigrants relied on others to help them make the transition to their new lives in the United States. Sometimes immigrants moved in with, or nearby, family members or others from their home communities. Where immigrants first stayed was not always where they ultimately settled. Immigrants moved to take advantage of opportunities for land, jobs, and community.

*Have you moved for a new opportunity?  
Were you able to use family, friends, or other  
networks in your transition?*

Along with material possessions, Norwegian immigrants brought the skills and traditions to create them. This migration of skills and decorative traditions is seen in the beautiful pieces of woodcarving, decorative painting, and textiles Norwegians made here in the United States. First generation immigrants brought and used these skills, but they were regularly rejected or forgotten by the second generation in its desire to create an identity that was more “American.” Skills and traditions were often revived by the third generation, or even later ones, in order to reconnect with the past. As a result, traditions have changed and continued to evolve through time.

*What traditions do you maintain?  
Have your traditions changed?*

Interested in folk art? Check out [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org) for our Folk Art School class schedule, tours to Norway, and the craft supplies in the Museum Store, and be inspired by the online Vesterheim Gold Medalists portfolio.



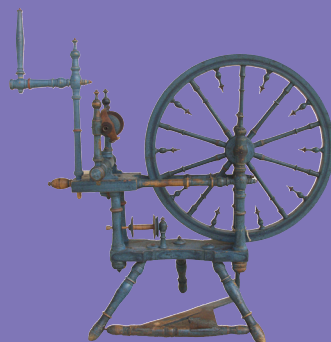


## Third Floor

### 7 Textiles



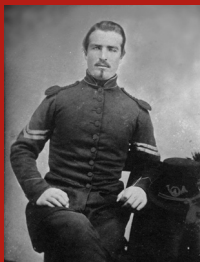
Work in rural Norway was divided between men and women. Women were responsible for the production of textiles, from fiber to finished product, while men often made and decorated the tools that women used, such as looms and spinning wheels.



These embroidered gloves were worn by a bride in Norway. Handwork, like embroidery and knitting, is one way Norwegian immigrants preserved their cultural heritage.

## Basement

### 8 Military Exhibitions



Norwegian Americans played a significant role in the American Civil War. Check the data base station to see if you may have relatives who served.



The 99th Infantry Battalion, activated in 1942, consisted of 1,001 Norwegians and Norwegian Americans who were being trained to liberate Norway from Nazi control.

### 9 Church Gallery



Maintaining religious faith was important to many Norwegian immigrants. They quickly established churches in their communities, usually with altarpieces similar to this one.

## Cultural Identity in American Society

Identity is created, assigned, shaped, and influenced by many different things. For Norwegian immigrants, their identity was shaped by their experiences and traditions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. One can imagine the questions in their heads as they negotiated their new lives in the United States. Who am I? Who should I be? Who do I want to be? Am I Norwegian? Am I American? Am I Norwegian-American?

*Who are you? What makes you who you are? The place you were born? The language you speak? What you do for a living? The religion you profess? Your race or cultural heritage? Your gender? Is it only one or two of these, or maybe several in a combination?*

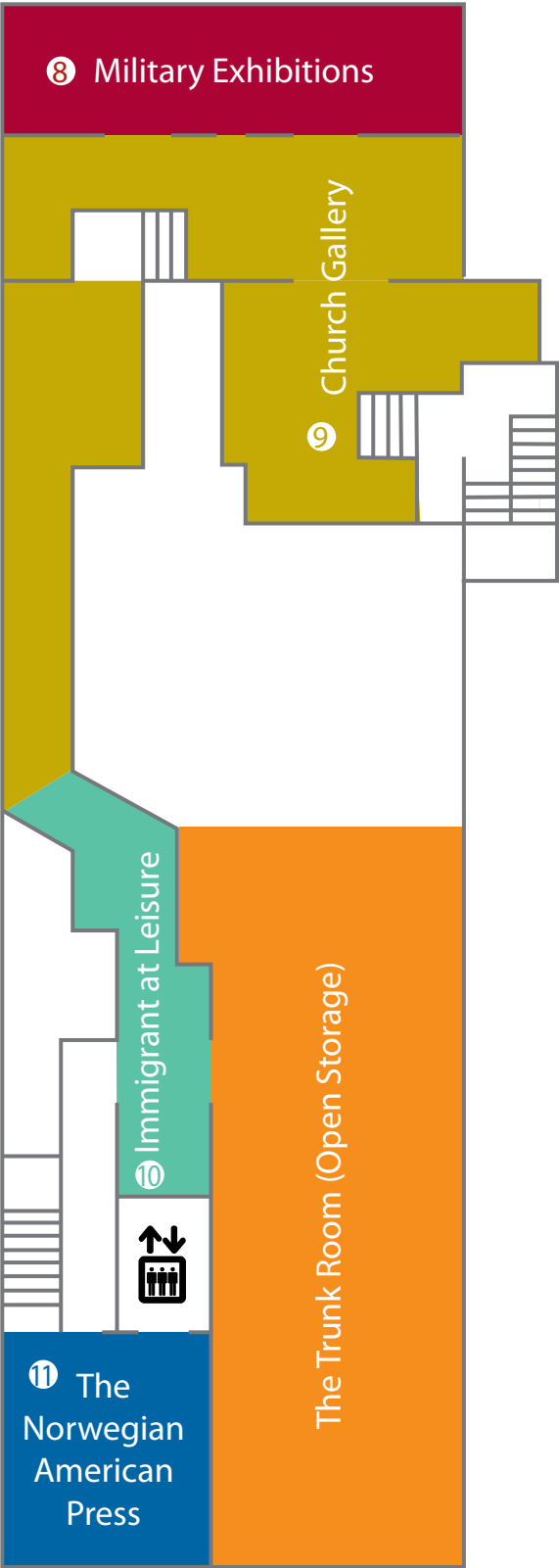
You may find the answers to these questions, and perhaps find even more questions, as you explore the textile gallery and special exhibitions on the third floor and the exhibitions about faith, military conflict, music, and the Norwegian-American press in the basement.

Each immigrant culture enriches us through food, art, music, and many other ways. Immigrant cultures are truly part of our American fabric. How has your life been influenced by your own immigrant background or the culture of other immigrant groups?

**Open Storage:** It is impossible to display all of the objects in Vesterheim's collection. When you are in the basement, take a peek in The Trunk Room (Open Storage) to see more.

Be sure to see the latest special exhibitions. Check for an insert in this Visitor Guide, or ask for a listing at the reception desk.

Want to see or learn more? Visit [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org) for links to virtual galleries, Vesterheim's archives, and the database of Norwegians in the Civil War.



## Basement

### 9 Church Gallery



Lars Christenson began carving this altarpiece in 1890. When he finished ten years later, his congregation did not accept it. One theory is that its style did not match what was more popular for immigrant churches. However, that decision ironically saved this masterpiece of twentieth-century folk art, because the church burned down not long after.

### 10 Immigrant at Leisure

Music, winter sports, and children's games filled the leisure hours of Norwegian Americans.



The Hardanger fiddle has sympathetic strings underneath the primary strings which resonate when the primary strings are played.

### 11 The Norwegian-American Press



*Decorah-Posten* (1874-1972) was one of over 400 Norwegian language newspapers printed in the U.S.





### Haugan House (1860-62)

Rural Decorah, Iowa #3 on campus map

This house is one of two similar log homes from rural Decorah now in the Open Air Division. Hans and Anna Haugan lived here for at least twenty years. They were in their fifties when they left Norway, whereas most immigrants were much younger. Like many immigrants, however, they were of the *husmann*, or tenant farmer, class. It is significant that in America, they owned their home and farm.



### Egge-Koren House (1852)

Rural Decorah, Iowa #4 on campus map

A typical first home built by immigrants of the *husmann*, or tenant farmer, class in Norway. It has been preserved in part because the owners, the Egge family, hosted a newly arrived Norwegian pastor, U.V. Koren, and his wife Elisabeth over the winter of 1853-54. U.V. Koren eventually established congregations and a legacy of service in a large geographic area out from Decorah. Elisabeth's diary, available in Vesterheim's Museum Store, describes the house and recounts local pioneer life in detail.



### Valdres House (1795)

Øystre Slidre, Valdres, Norway #5 on campus map

A modest landowner's home built with traditional labor-intensive log construction methods. Five of six children raised in this house left for frontiers in the United States and Canada at the height of emigration in the late 1800s. The house was moved from Norway to Vesterheim in 1975.



### Norsvin Mill (1800s)

Vang, Valdres, Norway #6 on campus map

This small grist mill reflects the subsistence economy that drove many to emigrate from Norway. A vertical shaft and horizontal waterwheel allowed efficient use of a small mountain stream to grind grain. Knut Norsvin had heard there were no stones in America, so he brought the millstones when he emigrated. His grandson found the mill itself at the Kongslien farm in Valdres, Norway, and had it shipped to America to house the millstones.



### Erikson-Hansen Stabbur (after 1860)

Olmstead County, Minnesota #7 on campus map

This building type, a storehouse placed on pedestals to deter pests, was a symbol of wealth in Norway. Having surplus agricultural products to store defined success and survival. This is a rare example because they were seldom found on Norwegian-American farms.



### Rovang Parochial School (1879)

Nordness, Iowa #8 on campus map

The “common school controversy” regarding the effect of public school on the cultural assimilation of immigrant children was a widely waged debate in the mid-1800s. Part-time religious education in the Norwegian language became an acceptable compromise between the American public school system and a separate Norwegian-American school system based on what the immigrants had been used to in Norway. This log schoolhouse served as a parochial school in rural Decorah for about four decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century.



### Bethania Lutheran Church (1901)

Rural Northwood, North Dakota

#9 on campus map

Typical of many rural churches in the Midwest, this one served a Norwegian-American farming community near Grand Forks, North Dakota, for over 80 years before being moved to Vesterheim in 1992. Much more than just a place of worship, it was the site of activities ranging from church suppers and charity auctions to youth groups and life-cycle events. For information about renting the church for weddings or other activities, visit us online at [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org).

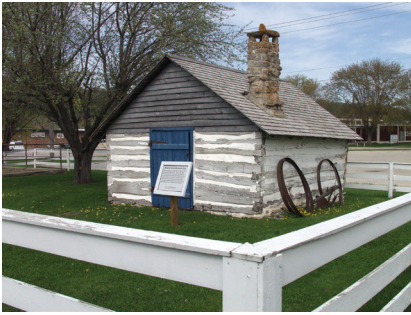


### Norris Miller Stovewood House (1855-56)

Decorah, Iowa #10 on campus map

Originally located on the west side of Decorah, this house is a rare example of stovewood construction, using short lengths of wood and mortar. With exterior siding, a parlor, and closets, it exemplified fashionable town living. Vesterheim acquired it because of its unique architecture—it is the only example known to exist in Iowa.





### Mikkelson-Skree Blacksmith Shop (1854) Sheldon Township, Houston County, Minnesota #11 on campus map

This building is a blend of Norwegian and American vernacular architecture. It is typical in form to blacksmith shops found on farms in Norway, but uses the efficient pioneer method of log construction with dovetail notching. It served for about a year as both a working forge and living quarters for the blacksmith and his wife, who emigrated from Telemark, Norway.



### Painter-Bernatz Mill (1851)

Decorah, Iowa #12 on campus map

The current structure represents the final version of the mill following two other expansions on the same location since it was first built in 1851. The mill operated by a water-powered horizontal turbine until 1947, and by diesel power until 1964. It now houses Vesterheim's exhibits on agriculture and industry. This mill is on the National Register of Historic Places and is a sight in the Silos and Smokestacks national Heritage Area.



### Wickney House (1879)

Rural Northwood, North Dakota

#13 on campus map

This prairie home is an example of balloon-frame, or two-by-four, construction. The original home was 14 by 16 feet. A lean-to was added later. The choice to build a home of these modest dimensions was likely influenced as much by cultural expectations as by the cost and availability of building materials on the frontier.



### Tasa Drying Shed (1860)

Goodhue County, Minnesota #14 on campus map

This building is an example of special-use buildings on Norwegian farms, which allowed for self-sufficiency in the relative isolation imposed by the geography of Norway. Like several other buildings at Vesterheim, this is an American-made building with Norwegian design and function, but constructed in a new way. It was used for brewing and for drying grain and could also serve as a bath house.







## ■ Norway

Norway's economy was mostly based on subsistence agriculture well into the 1800s. Hunting and fishing were also important. The country had very little land suitable for farming and all of it was held by a minority of landowners. The rest of the farming population were *husmenn*, or tenant farmers, who worked for landowners in exchange for a place to live. Even the largest farms were engaged in subsistence farming, rather than in raising crops for sale. Traditional Norwegian farms had many buildings, each of which had a specific function. (See an example of a traditional Norwegian farm in the Bjørnstad Farm model on display in the Painter-Bernatz Mill.) Several buildings in the Open Air Division exemplify these single-function buildings. The Valdres House was moved here from Norway and is an example of a modest landowner's home.

*Do you know people who are farmers? Are they self-sufficient? Do they raise a single crop or animal, or are they diversified, raising multiple crops or livestock?*

## ■ Rural Decorah

The Egge-Koren House, the Haugan House, and the Rovang Parochial School were all built within six miles of Decorah. The county's first permanent white settlers came in 1848 and Norwegian immigrants began arriving in 1850. Many of the original Norwegian immigrants came from Valdres and Telemark in Norway, following a typical pattern in which newcomers moved to communities where they already had a connection with friends or family from the home country. Because of the number of Norwegian families, the area became a stopping point for immigrants headed further west.

*Do you know where your immigrant ancestors came from? Did they settle near others from their native country?*

## ■ North Dakota

Norwegian immigrants looked to the west as more and more land in the east was claimed. North Dakota was one of the places they settled. The Wickney family passed through the Decorah area in the late 1870s on their way to Northwood, North Dakota. Bethania Lutheran Church is also from Northwood, North Dakota. It is typical of rural churches built in the Upper Midwest, which were often the spiritual and social heart of immigrant communities. By the late 1980s, changes in the rural economy left only seven families as members of Bethania Lutheran Church, and the building was decommissioned.

*If you immigrated to a new place, would you try to build a home like the one you came from, or would you try to build a home like others you see in your new neighborhood?*



## Homes

Although modest in size and appearance, log homes like the Egge-Koren House and the Haugan House were significant dwellings for immigrants who had been *husmenn*, or tenant farmers, in Norway. America gave them the opportunity to own a home and land. With new opportunities came new construction methods, like dove-tail notching, which accommodated the use of irregular logs. This was much quicker than the traditional Norwegian methods seen in the Valdres House and the Norsvin Mill. The Stovewood House reflects Yankee town living in the late 1800s, an aesthetic that eventually was adopted by most immigrants, even in rural homes like the Wickney House. Hospitality was regularly extended to newcomers until they were able to build or arrange for a home of their own. Elisabeth and Vilhelm Koren lived for several months with the Egge family in the Egge-Koren House and the Mikkelsen family used their blacksmith shop as their home for more than a year.

*Have you welcomed or could you welcome another family into your home for several weeks or several months? What would you have to share or give up to make this family comfortable? What makes a house a home?*



## Agriculture

The subsistence economy in Norway prepared Norwegian immigrants with a variety of skills that were also useful in pioneering. The log-constructed *stabbur*, drying shed, and blacksmith shop in the Open Air Division show how many immigrant farmers began by replicating building types and functions that were familiar to them in Norway. Once settled, immigrants quickly embraced evolving technology and expertise and became part of the larger market economy in the Midwest. The Painter-Bernatz Mill represents that larger economy. It was once one of over 30 mills in Winneshiek County in 1870, and continued in operation until 1964.

*Do you have skills or experience that would transfer well to another job in a different field or in a different location?*

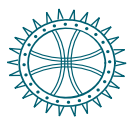


## Community Connections

The process of consciously becoming “hyphenated Americans” (Norwegian-American, Irish-American, German-American, etc.) began as immigrants responded to challenges related to faith, education, agricultural practices, and the broader culture in which they lived. In Decorah, Norwegian settlers soon realized it was up to them to start a church and invited a pastor from Norway. The absence of religious education in public school prompted them to establish a parochial school (the Rovang Schoolhouse). Challenges to both faith and education led to the founding of Luther College. Economic and social interactions between rural and town populations changed tastes and social ambitions, finally making immigrants “hyphenated Americans.”

*What community connections shape your identity?  
Do you consider yourself a “hyphenated American”?*





# Vesterheim

## The National Norwegian-American Museum & Heritage Center

Street address: 520 W. Water St., Decorah, IA 52101  
Mailing address: P.O. Box 379, Decorah, IA 52101  
563 382-9681 Fax: 563 382-8828  
vesterheim.org info@vesterheim.org



## Vesterheim Campus

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 Main Building  | 10 Norris Miller Stovewood House  |
| 2 Westby-Torgerson Education Center<br>Museum Store, Bruening Visitor Center,<br>Library, Classrooms | 11 Mikkelson-Skree Blacksmith Shop                                      |
| 3 Haugan House   | 12 Painter-Bernatz Mill   |
| 4 Egge-Koren House   | 13 Wickney House  |
| 5 Valdres House  | 14 Tasa Drying Shed   |
| 6 Norsvin Mill   | 15 Bauder-Landsgard Collections Study Center                            |
| 7 Erikson-Hansen Stabbur   | 16 Amdal-Odland Heritage Center<br>Administrative Offices               |
| 8 Rovang Parochial Schoolhouse   | 17 Decorah Chamber of Commerce and<br>Winneshiek County Visitors Center |
| 9 Bethania Lutheran Church   |   |