



The National Norwegian-American
Museum and Folk Art School

vesterheim.org

From Tremont Hotel to Museum

1849: The City of Decorah was founded by William Day (wife, Elizabeth) and named after Waukon Decorah, a Winnebago Tribe leader. The Winnebago Native Americans (Ho Chunk) had been removed from northeast Iowa in 1848.

1856: The Winneshiek House Hotel was built by William Day on the east end of Water Street. (Water Street is the main business district flowing east/west through Decorah.)

1857: The Tremont Hotel was built on the west end of Water Street by Eli George. The name "Tremont" was taken from a grand hotel in Boston.

1866: In February the Tremont Hotel, barn, and granary burned to the ground and a year later the land was sold to investors. On November 1 of the same year, most of the rest of the downtown businesses were destroyed by fire.

1869: The railroad was built on the east end of Water Street, not as previously had been planned for the west end of town.

1877: An elegant brick hotel named Arlington House Hotel opened its doors replacing the Tremont House Hotel.

1882-1890: Because the railroad was built at the east end of Water Street and not on the west end, the Tremont/Arlington Hotel started to board students to make up for lost revenue. It was now known as the Arlington Hall and eventually went out of business.

1890-1931: The Arlington Hotel then became the Lutheran Publishing House, which moved to Minneapolis in 1931.

Norwegian Immigration—Decorah

On October 9, 1825, a boat 54 feet long and 16 inches in width, called the *Restauration*, docked in the New York harbor. On board were 53 people who left their homes in Norway and set sail from Stavanger in search for a better life and religious freedom. Among those were nine married couples, 21 children, 13 single men, and one single woman. They were the first organized group of Norwegian immigrants in the United States.

1850: Norwegian Pioneer Settlement in Winneshiek County started.

1861-1865: Civil War.

1861: Luther College was established as a Norwegian Lutheran College.

1862: The Homestead Act opened up land in Iowa and the Midwest. Anyone 21 years of age or older, the head of a family, or a United States citizen or intended citizen could buy up to 160 acres of land for a small fee. The land did not become the homesteaders' until they had stayed on the land for a minimum of five years and had made improvements to the land.

Luther College Museum to Vesterheim

1875: Luther College started a miscellaneous collection of objects and artifacts to aid students in their studies.

1877: Luther College Museum began on the college campus.

1895–1902: Haldor Hanson, Luther's Professor of Music, became the first curator of the museum. Haldor changed the focus of the museum to an institution dedicated to the everyday life of a Norwegian American by combining artifacts already acquired by Luther and adding more. In 1902 he left his position after the forced resignation of his biggest supporter and the museum's instigator, President Laur Larson.

1911–1921: Curator C.K. Preus brought the idea of an "Open Air Division" back to Luther College in 1913 after seeing a collection of buildings at a museum called Maihaugen in Lillehammer, Norway. Four buildings were moved to the Luther College Campus from 1921–1930. It would become the first of its kind in the United States.

1922–1935: Curator Knut Gjerstet had a nationally known reputation as a leader. Under his direction, the museum's artifacts increased along with its recognition. In honor of the 1925 centennial of Norwegian immigration, museums in Norway made large donations of artifacts to the museum in Decorah. Maihaugen's Curator, Anders Sandvig, was in charge of collecting and shipping the gifts that would fill five semi-tractor trailers when they reached the United States. When the artifacts were on the way, Anders wrote to Knut telling of their journey, "May these objects work so that the Norwegian-ness in you will not die too soon and the connection with the homeland will because of this be tighter. Receive this gift as proof that we follow you all in our hearts even though the big Atlantic Ocean parts us." The museums in Norway made another gift in 1939.

1925: The museum was renamed Norwegian American Historical Museum.

1930: Knut Gjerstet bought 6,000 Norwegian-American artifacts known as the P. D. Peterson Collection from Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

1932: The museum collection had outgrown all of the buildings on the Luther College campus, thus Luther College purchased the abandoned Arlington Hotel/Publishing House for the collection.

1933: Luther College reopened the museum at the present site.

1936–1947: The museum was mostly dormant mainly because of the Great Depression and World War II.

1939: Crown Prince Olav and Crown Princess Martha visited the museum and presented a gift of 47 artifacts.

1947–1960: Museum was under the care of Curator/Director Inga Bredesen.

1965: The museum became an independent non-profit museum with its own staff and Board of Directors, separating Luther College from the museum. All artifacts that didn't relate to the Norwegians or Norwegian-American way of life were returned to Luther College. Soon after, it was referred to as Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum.

1969: Luther sold the present building to the museum for \$1.00 and gave loan of the artifacts owned by Luther to the museum for ten years, with renewal thereafter.

1973: Museum purchased land on Mill Street behind the Main Building for a future Heritage Park (Initially called Open Air Division.)

1974: The museum exterior was restored to original appearance of the hotel. The Publishing House had altered the front and removed balconies and ornaments from the roof.

1975: A dedication was held for the newly restored museum and guest of honor at the event was King Olav V of Norway.

1991: The museum acquired legal title to Luther College's collection that was on loan to the museum. The museum's name was officially changed to "Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum." *Vesterheim* means "western home" in Norwegian.

1999: The lobby and store were added to the main floor of the museum, and the store was subsequently moved to its present location in Vesterheim's Westby-Torgerson Education Center in 2011.

Present Day: There are currently 33,000 artifacts in the museum collection.

Heritage Park

Prior to 1976 the Egge-Koren House, the Haugan House, the Norsvin Mill, the Rovang Parochial Schoolhouse and the Tasa Drying Shed were housed at Luther College and subsequently moved to the present location.

Egge-Koren House was built in 1852 in the Washington Prairie area (southeast of Decorah) by Erik Egge (wife Helene). It was donated to Luther College in 1913 by son, Paul Egge. The building was moved to the Luther College Open Air Division in 1921.

Haugan House was built between 1860-1862 by Hans Haugan (wife Anna) in rural Decorah and moved to the Luther College campus in 1929-1930.

Norsvin Mill was built in the 1800s in Norway and given to the Luther College Museum by Knut Norsving so that it might house the millstones brought to America by his grandfather, Knut Norsvin. The mill and stones came from the Kongsken farm in Vang, Valdres, Norway.

Rovang Parochial Schoolhouse was built in 1879 by the Washington Prairie Lutheran Congregation. For two weeks per term, the children/grandchildren of Norwegian immigrants were allowed to attend the parochial school to be educated in their Norwegian heritage, including speech, language, writing, and religion.

Painter-Bernatz Stone Mill William Painter moved from Wisconsin to Decorah in 1849. He built his first mill to grind grains into flour on the banks of the Upper Iowa River near Dunning's Spring. In 1851 William built a new wood framed mill at the current mill location. He and Philip Morse then built a diversion dam and a millrace on the Upper Iowa creating a power source for the rare water turbine (created by William) used to grind the grains. Flour production began in 1852. During the years of operation, William enlarged the mill by encasing the wooden frame and adding stone around the exterior. The wooden upper section was added in 1890. William sold the mill in 1858 and the new owners continued to grind grains into flour until the late 1870s. It then produced feed for livestock. The mill ceased operation in 1966 and was sold to Roy Carlson who donated the building to Vesterheim in 1968. It became part of the Open Air Division in 1971 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Tasa Drying Shed was built around approximately 1865 by Knut Thompson Tasa and was used to dry barley to make beer. Other common uses were for drying grains for human and animal use or used as a bath house.

Mikkelson-Skree Blacksmith Shop was located in Houston County, Minnesota, and brought to Vesterheim's Heritage Park in 1971. It was built around 1854 by Mikkel Mikkelson Sinnes and was used as a home and blacksmith shop. It is similar to blacksmith shops in Norway. The shop was donated by the Darrell Skree family.

Valdres House was built around 1795 in the Valdres Valley in the municipality of Oystre Slidre in Oppland County and located on the Moahaugen farm in Haggenes. It was once the home of Norwegian painter Sigmund Aarseth's in-laws and the birthplace of his wife, Ingebjorg. Selected for Vesterheim by Sigmund, who was teaching a rosemaling class at Vesterheim when he was approached about the idea of bringing a home from Norway to the United States. Through fundraising and donations, the house was dismantled and shipped to the United States in 1975-1976. It was reconstructed at the present site by the two Norwegians who had taken it apart in Norway, Knut Steinsrud and Knut Sebuodegard, and a Norwegian volunteer, Ole Ladderud. It opened on October 7, 1977.

Norris Miller Stovewood House was built on Ohio Street in Decorah in 1855-1856 by Norris Miller. It is constructed of short lengths of wood and mortar and is the only stovewood-constructed home known in Iowa. Saved from a bulldozer by then-curator Darrell Henning, it was moved to the present site in 1976 and opened in 1977-1978. This is not a Norwegian-American home.

Wickney House was built by Anders Vikne (Wickney) in 1879 on a farm in Northwood, North Dakota. The house and most of the furnishings were donated to the museum by granddaughter, Ruth Wickney, and moved to the present site in 1982.

Erikson-Hansen Stabbur was built by Hans Erikson in Byron, Minnesota, to store food. It was built on stone pillars to keep out rodents and other animals. The *stabbur* was moved to the present site in 1988.

Bethania Lutheran Church was a country church built in 1903 near Northwood, North Dakota. Vesterheim Director Marion Nelson was in search of an altar made by Osten Pladsen to add to Vesterheim's collection and found one in a church that was up for auction. Because church and religion were a very important part of everyday life for the Norwegian immigrant, it was decided to buy the entire church, its pews, and the communion rail, pulpit, and baptismal font built by Pladsen. The altar had already been donated to Vesterheim. The church was relocated to its present site in 1992.

History of the Ship TradeWind

Leaving Kristiansand, Norway, in the spring of 1933, brothers Harald and Hans Hamran started on a 125-day journey across the Atlantic Ocean to visit the Chicago's World Fair and sailed into New York Harbor on July 29, 1933. The brothers sold their boat to the founder/owner of Chicago accounting firm, Arthur Anderson. Mr. Anderson presented the ship as a gift to Luther College in 1934 and it was shipped to Decorah by rail. A brick wall had to be removed and re-laid at the museum to allow the boat to be housed indoors, minus the mast. In 1975 the taller block room was added to the museum to house the boat, sail, and mast. (The book *TradeWind* is available for purchase in the Museum Store.)