



Visitor Guide



The National Norwegian-American
Museum and Folk Art School

vesterheim.org

Welcome to Vesterheim!

Norwegian immigrants called America their *Vesterheim*, their Western Home. Vesterheim, the National Norwegian-American Museum and Folk Art School, welcomes people of all ages and backgrounds to engage in the conversation of the American immigrant journey through the lens of the Norwegian-American experience, and to participate in the continual evolution of traditional folk art. With four floors of exhibits in the Museum Building, a gallery in Hanson Vesterheim Commons, and 12 historic buildings in Heritage Park, this treasure showcases the best in historic and contemporary Norwegian folk and fine art. Vesterheim also offers innovative and interactive classes and programs both on-site and online at vesterheim.org and Vesterheim social media. Be inspired, share history, and create art while visiting the exhibits, taking a class at the Folk Art School, and shopping the Museum Store!

Hours

Museum Building:

May 1 – Oct. 31: Daily, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Nov. 1– April 30: Daily, 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Museum Store and Hanson Vesterheim Commons:
Daily, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Heritage Park is open all day with outdoor interpretive information. Guided tours of Heritage Park with a chance to enter the buildings are scheduled from May 1 – October 31 and are included in museum admission.

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, and Easter.

Admission

Museum members – free

Adults – \$15

Ages 7–18 – \$8

Seniors 65+ – \$13

Tickets are good for the entire day.

You are welcome to visit sites around Decorah, have lunch, and return to the museum!

Second Saturday of each month – free for all

Museum Store

Located in the Westby-Torgerson Education Center, the store can be accessed through Hanson Vesterheim Commons. It offers Scandinavian-inspired clothing and gifts plus a wide range of folk-art supplies. Also available online at vesterheim.org.

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 an independent not-for-profit organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM).

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

Accessibility

Vesterheim buildings, with the exception of some historic buildings in Heritage Park, are wheelchair accessible. We apologize for any inconvenience. Let us know if a member of your party requires special accommodation or assistance. Service animals are welcome in all public areas of Vesterheim; pets (including emotional support animals) are not allowed in any of the buildings.

Photography

Non-flash photos are allowed for personal, noncommercial use. *All flash photography is prohibited and commercial use of images requires prior written consent.*

Are You a Vesterheim Member?

Enjoy the many benefits of a Vesterheim membership or give a gift to your friends and family. Members receive free admission, *Vesterheim* magazine, Museum Store and Folk Art School discounts, invitations to member events, and more. Ask the front desk attendant, scan the QR code, or join online at vesterheim.org.



Folk Art School

Vesterheim continues living traditions through its renowned Folk Art School, which began in 1967. The program now includes over 100 annual classes, both on-site and online, in rosemaling, painting, woodworking, fiber arts, metalworking, language and culture, food traditions, jewelry, music, and more, plus family activities and after school classes. Check out vesterheim.org for a class schedule and online registration.

Explore vesterheim.org

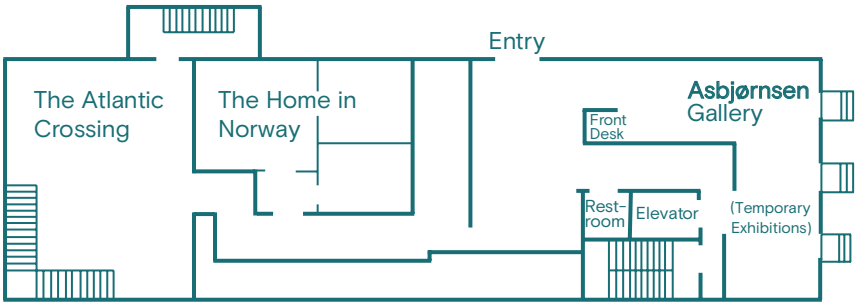
Connect with Vesterheim anywhere!

- Learn Vesterheim history
- Explore the collection in the virtual galleries
- Register for folk art classes
- Find out about events and tours to Norway
- Shop the Museum Store
- Read the latest on Vesterheim's Blog

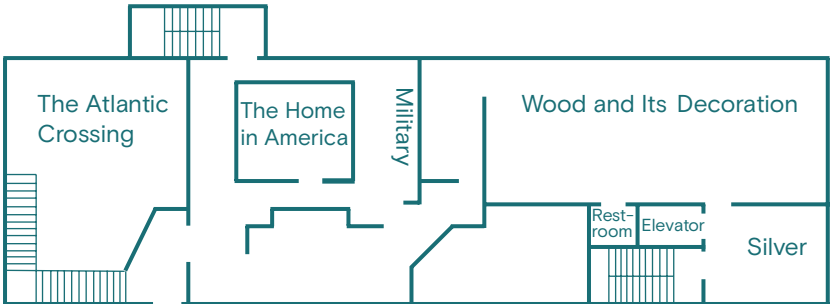


Museum Building

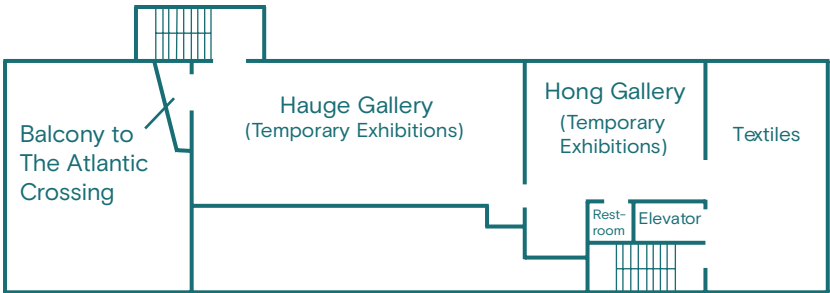
First Floor



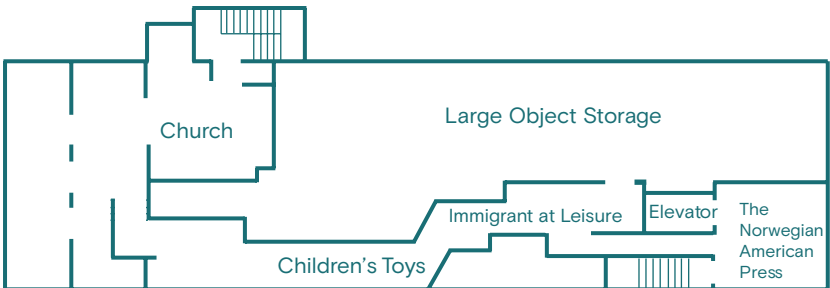
Second Floor



Third Floor



Basement



Leaving Home

The story of Norwegian immigrants is one of many that make up the ongoing history of immigration to the United States. There are similarities and differences between the experiences of Norwegian immigrants during the 1800s and 1900s and other immigrants then and today. Norwegian immigrants hoped to escape difficult circumstances, desired better opportunities, and longed for more freedoms. They brought belongings and keepsakes that they thought would be important.

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, hold on to, and share their traditions.

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?

Visit the first-floor Norway House to see a sample of a Norwegian home before emigration. Also explore the Large Object Storage in the basement, where there are many different examples of immigrant trunks.





In the 1800s and early 1900s, most immigrants arrived in the United States by ship. Whether by sailing ship or steamship, the journey for immigrants could be crowded and lack 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 on board a ship for seven days or seven weeks?

Visit the first-floor Atlantic Crossing Ship Gallery to find out more about Norwegian migration across the Atlantic Ocean. The ship, *TradeWind*, housed in this gallery was not immigrant transportation, but it was sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in 1933 by two Norwegians, Harald and Hans Hamran. In the courtyard bricks outside of Vesterheim's Museum Building, you can see the shape of *Restauration*, the small sailing ship that carried the first organized group of Norwegian immigrants to the United States in 1825. It is not much bigger than the *TradeWind* and it carried 53 passengers.

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.

The Decorah area's first permanent white settlers came in 1848, and Norwegian immigrants began arriving in 1850. Many of these Norwegian immigrants came from Valdres and Telemark in Norway. Because of the large number of Norwegian families, the area became a stopping point for immigrants headed further west.

Once in the United States, Norwegian immigrants sometimes struggled with barriers like the inability to make a livelihood, dependence on other community members, language, and the challenges of negotiating new American ways. Immigration is an experience lived by individuals, and each has a unique story.

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

Visit the second-floor Selland House to see a sample of a Norwegian immigrant home in America.





Along with material possessions, Norwegian immigrants brought an array of skills to create these tools and objects, and they often decorated them with beautiful designs. This migration of skills and decorative traditions is seen in the beautiful pieces of woodcarving, painting, textiles, and other objects that 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 the 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 their past. As a result, traditions have changed and continued to evolve over time.

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

Visit the second-floor galleries of wood, rosemaling, and silver. Visit the third-floor gallery of textiles to see tools, furniture, and clothing for ordinary life, designed with astounding Norwegian decorative traditions.

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.



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



TradeWind
1st floor, *The Atlantic Crossing*



The White Birches by Jonas Lie
1st floor, *The Atlantic Crossing*



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



The 99th Infantry Battalion
2nd floor, *Military Exhibitions*



Refrigerator Rosemaling by Per Lysne
2nd floor, *The Home in America*



Chip-Carved Bowl by Miles Lund
2nd floor, *Wood and Its Decoration*



Viking-style Drinking Horn by Lars Kinsarvik
2nd floor, *Wood and Its Decoration*



Bridal Crown from Sør-Trøndelag, Norway
2nd floor, *Silver*



Wise & Foolish Virgins Tapestry from Norway
3rd floor, *Textiles*



Altarpiece by Lars Christenson
Basement, *Church Gallery*



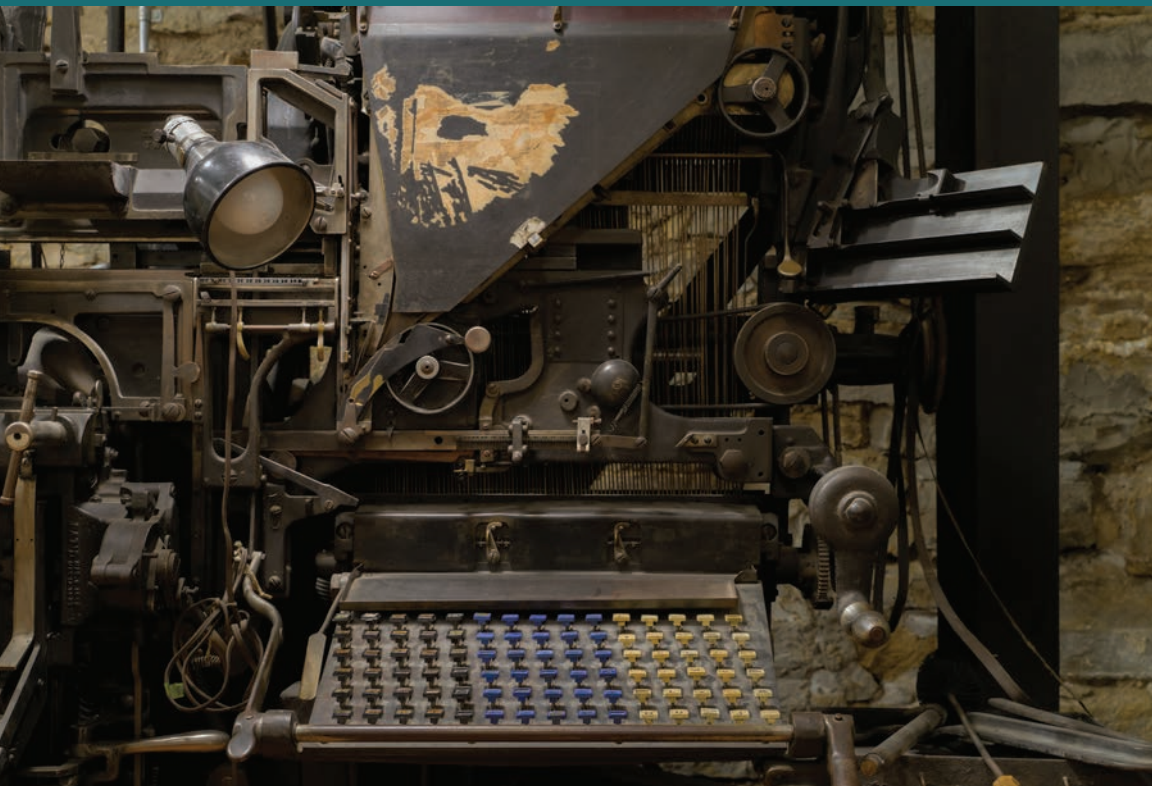
Heritage Park
Outdoor paths and interpretive panels open all year.
Guided tours of buildings from May 1 to October 31.

Cultural Identity in American Society

Identity is created, assigned, and shaped in many different ways. For Norwegian immigrants, their identity was influenced by their experiences and traditions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. You 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 all of Vesterheim's galleries.



Celebrating Folk Art

Making things by hand and making ordinary objects beautiful through folk art has been an important part of Norwegian culture that continued to evolve as Norwegians emigrated to America. Because of Vesterheim's close ties to Norway and the continuation of these traditions through Vesterheim Folk Art School, the museum's collection includes a remarkable selection of Norwegian folk art from both Norway and America.

Part of the collection is a significant gift of historical objects that came in 1925 from Norwegian museums for "the Norwegian people in America" to mark the 100th anniversary of Norwegian emigration. The gift, which took two years to assemble, ultimately filled 23 crates when it crossed over the ocean to the United States in 1927.

Vesterheim continues to add to the collection, including contemporary pieces created by Norwegian-American artists. The second-floor gallery showcases many fine examples.

What do you enjoy about folk art? How can making things with your hands bring joy to your life?





Hanson Vesterheim Commons

Hanson Vesterheim Commons is open daily from 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. with no admission charge, and there is often a special exhibit open in the second floor gallery. The Commons is a welcome center that provides a spectacular front Water Street entry, easy access into Heritage Park, direct connection to the Museum Store and Folk Art School, and a community gathering space. It is the first building in Iowa designed by Snøhetta, the renowned international architecture and landscape architecture firm.

In addition to linking with the local environment, the materials and construction techniques draw inspiration from Norwegian culture. Marked by a soaring wooden canopy with a shape reminiscent of traditional Norwegian boats, the sustainable building stands on a mass timber frame construction of Alaskan Yellow Cedar. The concrete walls were inspired by Norwegian designer Erling Viksjø, the concrete footings evoke the stone foundations of traditional Norwegian *stabbur* storehouses, and a wood oculus resembles Sámi tents, known as *lavvu*. The south facing three-story window is embedded with a fritting design inspired by the limestone palisades in Decorah, along with some traditional acanthus outlines.

Stop by to learn more and see this stunning facility.



Heritage Park

Located behind the Museum Building, Heritage Park includes 12 historic buildings, which depict the story of immigration, showcasing life in Norway in the 1800s and then life for immigrants in America. Each building has a short narration telling its story. The park is a forested area, interspersed with glade-like openings. There is a welcome patio that includes a brick outline of the *Restaurasjon*, a timber frame meeting area, and an outdoor stone amphitheater. Be sure to visit the carved portals marking the entrances to the park. You are invited to wander through time, past and present, along the pathways and plantings. Guided tours of the buildings are offered during the summer months. Call ahead or check vesterheim.org for times.

Egge-Koren House (1852)

Rural Decorah, Iowa

[#4 on campus map](#)

This is 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 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, this house was moved from Norway to Vesterheim in 1975. 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.

Norsvin Mill (1800s)

Vang, Valdres, Norway

[#6 on campus map](#)

Many farms in Norway used small water-powered mills to grind grain, press apples, and process cloth. These mills were usually only big enough to serve the needs of the farm. Knut Norsvin heard there were few stones in America so he brought these millstones with him when he emigrated from Norway. 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 and protect from ground moisture, 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](#)

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.

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.

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](#)

European immigrant William Painter built this mill around 1850 and used it to grind grain. 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 site in the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area.

Wickney House (1879)

Rural Northwood, North Dakota

[#13 on campus map](#)

Anders Vikne built this house on his homestead near Northwood, North Dakota, in 1879 after immigrating to America from Norway. The prairie home is an example of balloon-frame, or two-by-four, construction. The original home was 14 by 16 feet, and a lean-to was added later.

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.

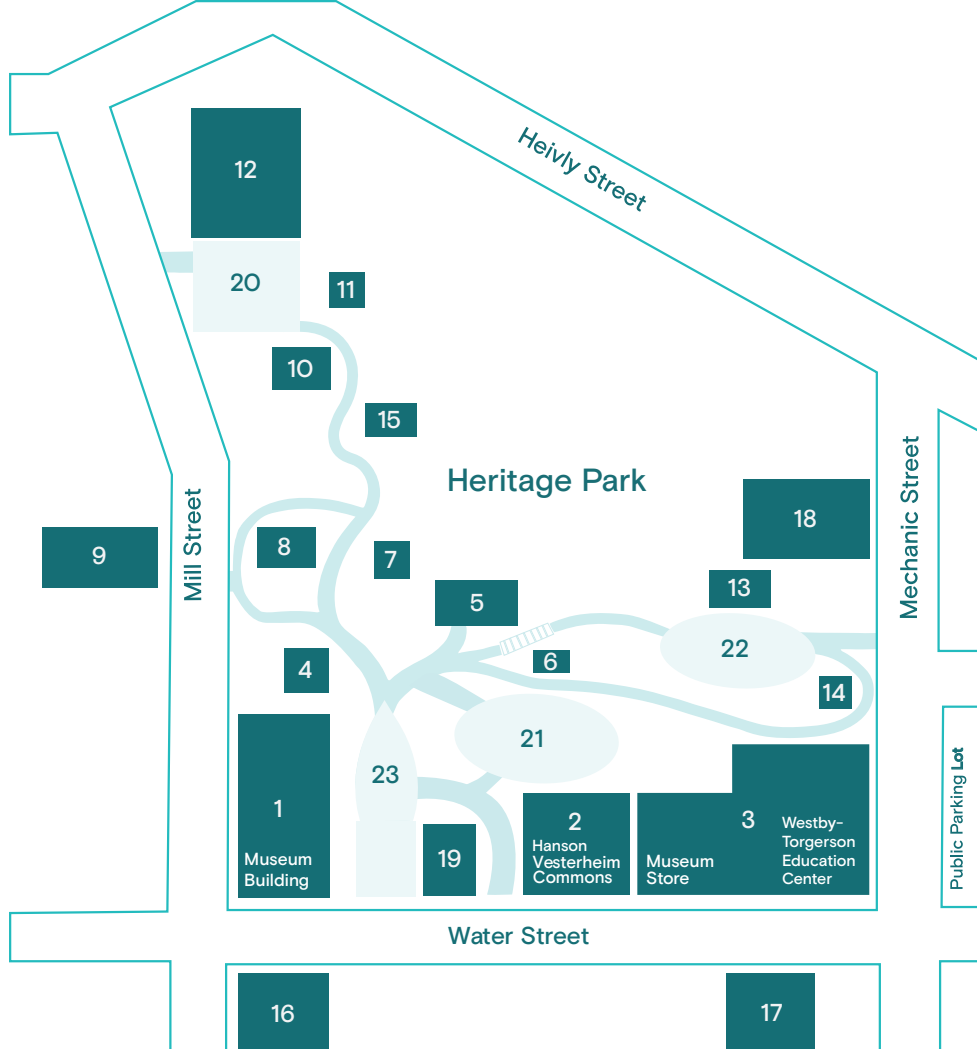
Haugan House (1860–62)

Rural Decorah, Iowa

[#15 on campus map](#)

This house is one of two similar log homes from rural Decorah now in Heritage Park. Hans and Anna Haugan, who were *husmann*, or tenant farmers in Norway, could not own their farm there, so it is significant that they were able to in America.





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| 1 Museum Building | 13 Wickney House |
| 2 Hanson Vesterheim Commons | 14 Tasa Drying Shed |
| 3 Westby-Torgerson Education Center, Museum Store, Bruening Welcome Center, Classrooms | 15 Haugan House |
| 4 Egge-Koren House | 16 Amdal-Odland Heritage Center Administrative Offices |
| 5 Valdres House | 17 Decorah Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center |
| 6 Norsvin Mill | 18 Bauder-Landsgard Collection Study Center |
| 7 Erikson-Hansen Stabbur | 19 Administrative Offices |
| 8 Rovang Parochial Schoolhouse | 20 Timberframe Plaza |
| 9 Bethania Lutheran Church | 21 Commons Plaza |
| 10 Norris Miller Stovewood House | 22 Amphitheater |
| 11 Mikkelson-Skree Blacksmith Shop | 23 Restauration Plaza |
| 12 Painter-Bernatz Mill | |