

The Stafford Bicentennial: Identifying With the Past in Order to Prepare for the Future

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A bicentennial of any sort is an example of how historical thinking expands our sense of where we stand in the world. We could of course offer a simple rendition of facts – Stafford took form on March 24, 1820 when it emerged from sections of Batavia and LeRoy. One could add that its rich soil facilitates the growth of a variety of crops. Limestone used for construction purposes is discoverable as well in Stafford. However, reducing Stafford's bicentennial celebration to a mere factual narrative misses the point. A bicentennial is an opportunity to acknowledge that a community such as Stafford is more than a timeline or a collection of facts. It is instead a community in existence for two centuries; serving to extend a sense that one's life today goes beyond this moment. In the process, it helps to give meaning to a person's life, along with serving as a necessary anchor in a world that all too often undergoes swirling – and incomprehensible – change.

The events that will characterize this year's celebration embody the idea of the bicentennial. Through participation in Founders Day, square dancing, and the Landmark Society's Home, Barns, Roads, and Cemetery tours, we are able to go beyond the finite quality of our own lives and identify with generations preceding us. We can also view our own lives in the light of generations that will follow. In other events, such as the Taste of Stafford; the Antique Truck, Farm, and Construction Show; the Community Thanksgiving Hymn Sing; and the Father's Day Car Show we are able to see ourselves as part of Stafford's history. Out of this comes a realization that Stafford is more than what it is now. Instead, it is part of a picture much bigger than what we experience in our own day.

In a present-minded and narrowly materialistic society such as ours, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of neatly naming a community, such as Stafford, as a trivialized unfolding of decades whose only function is to offer nostalgia. Nevertheless, a bicentennial demands more of us. Rather than form without content, we have the chance to have a more meaningful link to a past that

extends into the future. The events fostering a recognition of Stafford's bicentennial refuse to reduce Stafford's rich history to the mere purchase of souvenirs. Rather, events such as those already mentioned, along with those not mentioned, compel active engagement with the community. These events foster empathy and imagination. Looking at something such as the Landmark Society's tour, or the antique truck, farm, and construction show, one can begin to understand more fully an earlier world in Stafford that is quite unlike our own in the first decades of the twenty-first century. While Elijah W. Northrup's woolen factory is gone, our recognition of what it signified sparks one's curiosity and respect. It also reminds us that while previous generations may be gone, what they experienced unites them with us, prompting us to remember that we are all humans who have much more in common than is often suspected. The bicentennial stimulates us to see our link with earlier residents such as Elijah W. Northrup. It also resurrects those who came before by telling their stories, and this serves to influence new generations. The bicentennial helps to shape our lives, and, in the process, the entire community. We look at our past in Stafford and then use it to fashion our understanding of what the future may look like. That is why the bicentennial in Stafford matters.