

A Restoration Plan for the  
**Thorstein Veblen Study Cabin**  
Washington Twp. Little Lake Park  
Washington Island, Wisconsin  
June, 2010

Prepared for:  
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“He saw and fell in love with a plot of land which lay between Green Bay and a small inland lake on our property where he could see the sunrise over the small lake and the sunset over Green Bay.” Sigurlin Bjarnarson, a first generation Icelandic Islander, wrote Joseph Dorfman, 1934 *New Light* pp 189

“Among these Scandinavian people he felt a spiritual affinity that gave him the peace of mind needed for study and writing.” Anne Whitney, *Let's Talk about Washington Island 1850-1950* 1973 pp101

## **INTRODUCTION:**

There is something ancient and life transforming in the process of building a simple shelter, with only hand tools, on a “shoe string” budget, in a clearing of trees and great natural beauty. For eighteen years this historic preservationist had such a place. It was a remote forty acre parcel of land on marginal but beautiful land near Blue Mounds, Wisconsin. Here on a rocky unglaciated outcrop of sandstone and oak trees we built a log cabin from trees felled on site. It was a place I could retreat to, clear my thoughts and get into the rhythm of the place. We “City Slickers” enjoyed our regular meetings with the Norwegian farmer neighbors, exploring the property in all seasons and discovering the many natural features that were in abundance. In such a place as this the mind clears, the body slows down and the inner soul begins to emerge.

## **WORK PLAN AND INTERPRETIVE DATA:**

Built in the summer of 1916 by the 57 year old noted economics scholar, Thorstein Veblen and his family, the cabins at Little Lake served as places of retreat, research and writing. In total, Veblen experienced a nearly thirty year association with Washington Island and its Scandinavian and Irish inhabitants. Here he produced several books, gave nature walks to family and friends, built rustic furniture and a wooden row boat, and socialized with the Islanders. The study cabin was used by Veblen for nearly eleven years. The fifteen acre parcel located on an ancient 300 foot wide isthmus of rocky shore land between the waters of Green Bay was finally sold in 1929 for \$500, after the death of Veblen in California and four months before the stock market crash.

In 1925, Veblen published *The Laxdaela Saga*, a traditional Icelandic/Viking story, that took him many years to translate into English. This project may have been the original reason that in the late 1890's brought him to Washington Islands Icelandic settlement. He had mastered nine other languages and now it was time to learn the Icelandic language.



In April of 1929, a sickly Thorstein Veblen told his step-daughter Becky, that he wanted to return to Washington Island one last time. It was a special place for him where he may have had his most enjoyable moments of his life. He died at the age of 72 on August 3, 1929 in California, four months before the stock market crash. However, it was here on Washington Island, Wisconsin, that he created with talented hands and mind his most honored accomplishments. It was a "place where Veblen felt at ease with himself and his surroundings". Bartley and Yoneda, Thorstein Veblen on Washington Island. Traces of a Life. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol7, No. 4, 1994 pp596.

### **RESTORATION AND INTERPRETATION "POINT-IN-TIME"**

It is suggested that the summer of either 1924 or 1925 be used as the specific Point-in-Time period for interpreting this nationally significant story line and historic structure. It was during this period that Veblen finished his *Laxdaela Saga* translation. It was published in 1925 four years before his death. This time period would allow the following concepts to be introduced:

1. Norwegian origins and his family, Valdres, Wisconsin settlement ties, schooling and teaching positions, and two marriages.
2. All of Veblen's significant economic concepts and publications.
3. At home with the "Islanders", Island life, old photos, etc.
4. Descriptions and drawings of the Spartan cabin interior and exterior would reinforce Veblen's frugal lifestyle and familiarity with making hand made things of wood.
5. Original cabin site mapped and described.
6. His knowledge of Island vegetation and animal life.
7. A feeling of finishing a life's greatest work.

A few unanswered restoration questions remain at this time:

1. Fastening of the wooden shutters and screens.
2. Design of door stoops.
3. Interior furnishings and arrangement.
4. The thickness of the roof's 34" wide tar paper covering.

### **RESTORATION PLAN**

1. **The Site:** Having been moved in June of 2009, the 12'-6" X 16'-0" wood frame cabin presently sits on a temporary treated wood foundation, 60 feet south of the in-drive into The Jens Jacobson Cabin Museum grounds at Little Lake, Washington Island. It is 8 feet west of a rustic pole fence and 34 feet north of a fenced private property. An abandoned stone-lined shallow dug well is located at the end of the east fence line about 25 feet from the cabin. The cabin's interior was braced and cut in-two (front half and rear half) for the approximate ¼ mile move. Unfortunately, the cabin should have been rotated 180 degrees from where it presently faces, to allow the original main door to face the arriving park visitors.

The new cabin site is in a small opening in a cut over forest of white cedar, oak, red maples, birch and white pine trees. The waters of Little Lake can barely be seen through



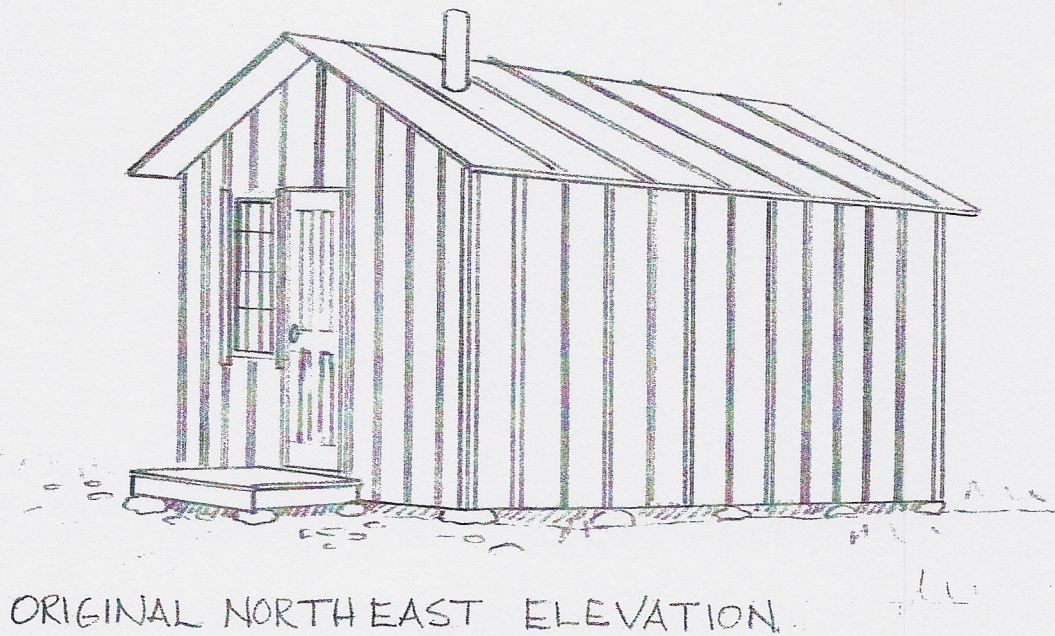
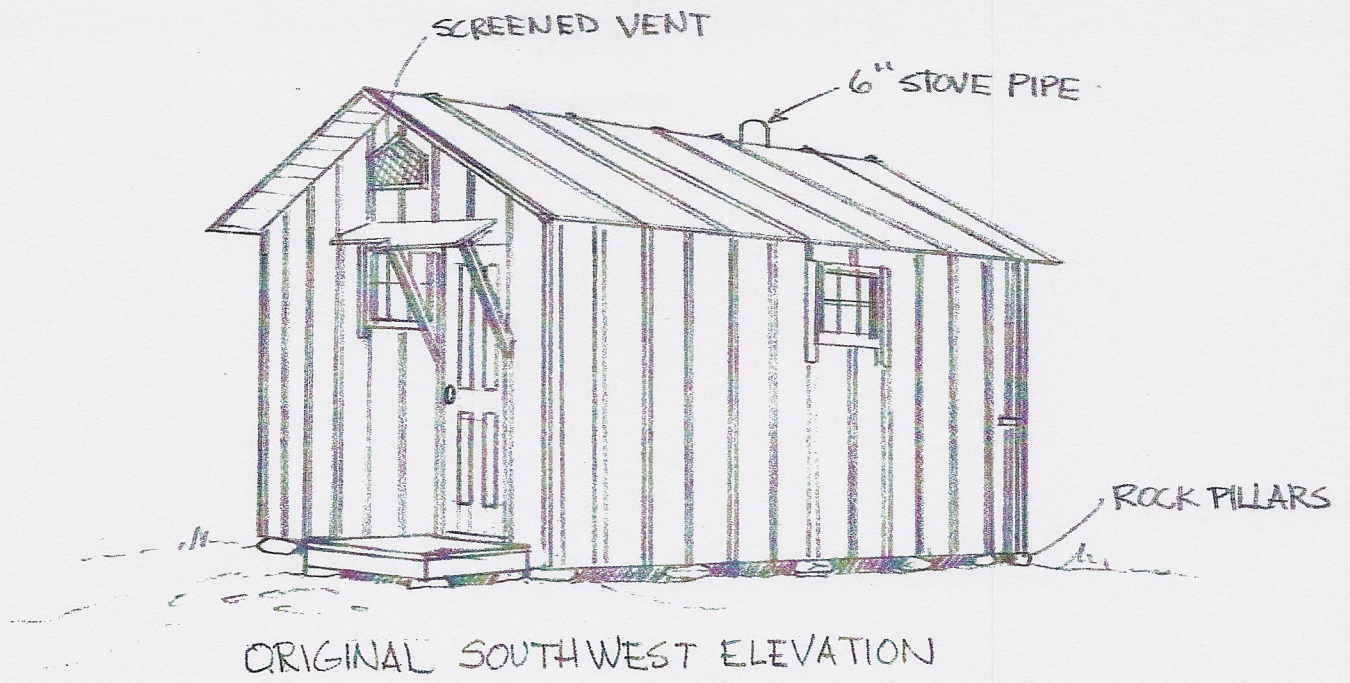


RESTORATION PERIOD Ca. 1924

Photo Analysis

1. Porch Roof
2. Swing out 6 pane sash
3. Crude screen over air vent
4. 6" Metal stove pipe
5. Uncoated roll roofing with Wood battens
6. No gable trim boards
7. No so fit trim on single thickness roof boards - no gutters
8. Tar paper siding, over wood wall boards using wood battens
9. Closed up original window opening
10. Small horizontal batten
11. Board shutter for Big window 28"x44"
12. Board shutters for small windows 22"x28"





THORSTEIN VEBLÉN'S STUDY CABIN. Ca. 1924 AC. PAPER.



the forest, some 300 feet to the northeast. The site has no similarity to the original. The Park is owned by the citizens of Washington Twp. And managed by the Town Board. Picnic tables, gravel parking areas and a public pit toilet are available as well as a few large wooden and steel historic artifacts. A donation admission fee is collected by the paid staff and volunteers who man the Jacobson museum about 200 feet north of the cabin. A professionally designed and constructed exterior interpretation board is planned for the site as well as occasional tours of the cabin that would contain basic furnishings.

**2. The Foundation:** Effort should be made to replicate the simple beach rock pillars that held the cabin above the ground. The structure should be turned around and jacked up to install a grade level reinforced concrete slab, 6" thick. The original floor joists should be treated with "Timbor" wood preservative while on jacks and lowered onto limestone beach rocks gathered from the original site. Five pillars on the long sides and four on the ends with five up the middle. (see sketches). The existing (built too small) treated wood foundation and gravel should be removed. If possible, a sample archeological dig should be preformed before the slab is graded, formed and poured.

**3. Deck Framing:** The 2" x 5-3/4" pine box sill carries 2" x 5-3/4" floor joists on 24" centers with a single thickness floor of 3/4" x 5" full length lapped pine flooring blind nailed above. This simple deck of pine boards received the wall framing. This floor is in good condition and only needs to be chemically stripped of its paint.

**4. Exterior Walls:** Remove all layers of siding going down to the original vertical 3/4" x 9-10" x 8' circle sawn and band saw sawn pine boards. You will be removing some of the original tar paper covering which has been ruined due to the later modifications. Close up three non-original window openings, (see sketches) with similar 3/4" pine boards.

Stabilize the roof at this point using a 1/16" thick braided metal wire and turn-buckle system attached to two-1/4" x 2" x 12" exterior mounted predrilled horizontal plates (one on each side wall at the rafter plates). These plates act as both a bridge between both cabin halves and as a mounting bracket for the wire cable. Reuse existing drilled holes in rafter plates near separation cut. Remove temporary interior post and rafter brace. Tighten wire to remove any deflection in the roof ridge and side walls. Several galvanized gang nailing plates may be installed on the exterior to strengthen joints where cabin was sawn in half. Straighten and pull in all cabin walls that were pulled apart during the moves. These plates will be hidden under the new tar paper exterior covering.

Cover entire exterior wall boards with 1/16" thick x 24" wide tar paper. Refer to original photos for seam placement. Use ungalvanized large head roofing nails at seams and mid-point of paper. Remove galvanizing from modern nails with meriatic acid before application. Do not use aluminum nails or nails that penetrate the siding.

Two sizes of pine battens were originally used. 1/4" x 2" over the seams and 1/4" x 1-1/4" at the tar papers mid points. At the four corners use 3/4" x 3" pine corner trim boards. Use 6 penny box head nails to secure battens.



**5. Roof:** Remove the modern roof coverings down to bare wood. During the cabins first move in the 1990's, when it was attached to the larger cabin, a section of the original 5/8" pine roof over hang was removed on the original east end, plus a wider south roof overhang board was installed. Re-cut this board to match the opposite side roof overhang size and splice in new unpainted matching roof boards, going back one rafter from the end wall to strengthen the replacement overhang.

All of the existing exterior 1-3/4" x 3-3/4" rafters and roof boards need to be stripped of paint. Reuse the existing metal stove pipe opening that held a six inch stove pipe exiting smoke from a cast iron laundry stove below. Apply 34" wide heavy gage roll roofing (plane black material with no aggregates) according to original photos. Nail with ungalvanized roofing nails and cover the seams with treated wood battens 1/4" x 1-1/2". Nail battens to roof with 6 penny box head nails similar to the exterior wall battens.

No trim boards of any kind are used on the roof edges. Trim the roofing paper to neatly overhang the edge by 1".

**6. Windows:** No original windows remain. Three hinged, out-swinging barn sash divided light windows were used at this period (ca. 1924). Two at 22" x 28" (six light) and one at 28" x 44" (twelve light). The sash was boarded on two sides by simple 1" x 3" unpainted pine trim boards. These window openings used removable simple wood framed screens and pine wood shutters attached with interior applied hinges and hooks. Two sets of hinges remain for pattern. The shutters were made out of simple vertical pine boards held together by wooden cleats. (see photos). The exterior of the windows and frames were painted a very dark blackish brown. Interior, the sash were left with off white primer.

Install metal window screening on the exterior of the east facing gable window vent using simple narrow unpainted wood battens.

**7. Doors:** The original two doors are extent. They are 1-3/8" thick four raised panel doors. The front door is 30" x 6'-6" and the back door which faced Little Lake is the same design but one inch shorter. They used cast iron surface locks and decorative cast iron hinges. These doors and the side jambs were painted the dark brown/black as the sash. The original door opening has recently been in filled with boards and must be reopened. An earlier door way opening was used (Phase I 1916) until the stove was installed and the access needed to be moved closer to the corner writing shelf. Strip the paint off these two doors and repaint with dark brown oil based paint. The original east door threshold is still in place. Match this 1/2" x 6" tapered pine for the missing west threshold. No screen doors were used on the cabin during this period ca. 1924.

**8. Entrance roof:** A small simple tar paper covered board entrance roof is located over the main door way. This type of porch roof is made from six boards. Two, 3/4" pine roof boards (12" x 60" and 12" x 34") to allow space for the out swinging window. These are nailed to two 1" x 3" x 23" rafters and two 1" x 3" x 40" support braces. (see sketch).



**9. Misc.:** Chemically strip all the interior paint from the floors, walls and ceilings. There are professional paint stripper companies in Green Bay, that will do this work using low pressure water spray and bio-degradable strippers.

Provide two non-original treated wood door stoop platform/steps. Platform to be 6" x 4' x 5'. and set on top of limestone beach rocks. No screws to show.

**Summary:** It is recommended that the Veblen Study Cabin be restored to the year 1924 and adapted to it's new location as authentically as possible. This necessities turning the structure 180 degrees and building a hidden reinforced 6" thick concrete foundation slab (12'-6" x 16'-0") to contain beach rock cabin support pillars. The structures entire interior must be stripped of all paint and the exterior covered with authentic looking heavy gage tar paper. Three windows need to be filled in and one door way reestablished. An non authentic interior support cable and exterior metal plates need to be installed to regain the structures strength. The underside of the cabin needs to be treated with "Timbor" wood preservative and three new divided window barn sash installed and painted. The original two raised panel doors are extent and only need to be stripped, repainted and rehung.

It is suggested that the cabin be furnished with orange create shipping boxes stacked and nailed to the windowless wall, a small laundry stove and pipe installed and some reproduction pieces of Veblen's rustic furniture included. Because of the problems of this unprotected site, nothing of value should be left in the structure such as original books, furniture or personal items. The cabin could be opened on a request bases otherwise visitors will be able to look inside through the large window. Closely positioned non-original galvanized eye screws attached to the door jamb and door face and padlocks can be used to lock the two doors.

A modern vandal and UV proof display exhibit should be prepared to be installed about 40 feet west of the cabin that would cover all the main story line points of the Thorstein Veblen experience and importance. (See seven points outlined previously in point-in-time list).

(end)



Veblen Study Cabin 5/19/2010 ACP

5 of 5

West. Door edge and original 2"x4" door jamb.



Bone wood.

1. Dark Walnut brown to black.
2. Tan
3. Dark Green
4. Salmon Red.



Benjamin Moore paint "Deep Bronze" no #

Veblen Study Cabin 5/19/2010 ACP  
1 of 5 Washington Island, WI

Front door edge: 30" x 6'-6" x 1 3/8" 4 panel uses Cast iron surface locks.

Bone wood.

1. Dark Walnut brown to black
2. Tan
3. Dark Green
4. Salmon Red.



Veblen Study Cabin 5/19/2010 ACP

4 of 5

original East Door Jamb

1. Tan
2. Dark Green
3. Salmon Red.





Original West window sash trim next to sash



- 1. Tan
- 2. Dark Green
- 3. Salmon Red.

Veblen Study Cabin 5/19/2010 ACP

Original West Main Entry Door Stop.  
 1/4" Pine  
 1 3/4"



- 1. Tan
- 2. Dark Green
- 3. Salmon Red.

Paint this dark brown on the exterior of the two doors and three windows and jambs.  
 No interior paint used c. 1927.  
 ACP.



Benjamin Moore Paint  
 Semigloss enamel oil base  
 "Deep Bronze" no #  
 use oil base primer