



Stepping back into 1856

The Gardner Cabin today

Imagine constructing a log cabin in the unsettled frontier of northwestern Iowa in the mid-1850s. Then imagine spending a harsh Iowa winter with seven other individuals in that one-room cabin, measuring a mere 17 by 22 feet.

Visiting the Gardner Cabin today invites such reverie. While the cabin survives as a reminder of a tragic frontier event (as the previous articles explain), it also speaks to us as an example of settlers' housing.

Since 1856, the year it was built, the cabin has undergone several changes. In 1862 or '63, a second story was added. In 1891 Abbie Gardner Sharp added a lattice overhang (removed in 1962 by the Iowa

Conservation Commission). When the cabin was transferred to the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1974, architects and archaeologists conducted research and decided to return the cabin to its 1856 appearance, size, and form. Directed by architect William Wagner and State Historical Society staff, master carpenter and craftsman Harold Howell, of Des Moines, worked for a year on the cabin.

Using authentic materials and techniques whenever possible gave Howell plenty of insight about Rowland Gardner, who constructed the cabin for his family. "Building a log cabin is slow work, and there's no way to rush it," Howell told a

reporter. "You notch a log, check to see if it fits, and then notch again. Each log goes up one at a time." Howell worked with seasoned oak logs: "I've gone through two hand axes, and am always sharpening tools.

"Gardner evidently did a real fine job on the original cabin, and I'll guarantee that he had his work cut out for him," Howell noted during the project. "Some paintings of the cabin show its roof to be much higher than it was. The roofs couldn't have been that high, because it's just too hard to lift the logs up there. We used a backhoe when we put them up, and I'm sure that Gardner had no backhoe." —The Editor



Some of the objects related to the "Spirit Lake Massacre" and Indian culture that Abbie Gardner Sharp displayed in her cabin are now exhibited in the site's interpretive center (above). Others are on exhibit at the Dickinson County Museum in nearby Spirit Lake. Also part of the five-acre historic site is the 1895 monument.



The Gardner Cabin is furnished with settlers' artifacts, some gathered by Abbie Gardner Sharp. The cabin served many roles in the Iowa lakes region: as the first settler's home, first church, first schoolhouse—and the first tourist attraction.

Planning a visit to Gardner Cabin? Here's what you need to know.

- Location: On Monument Drive, one block west of Arnolds Park Amusement Park in Arnolds Park, Iowa.
- Hours: Memorial Day weekend through September.
Monday-Friday: noon to 4 pm
Weekends: 9 am-4 pm
- School groups may schedule field trips from April 15 through September.
- On the Web: www.iowahistory.org
Then go to "Historic Sites," and then to "Gardner Cabin." A teachers guide is also accessible at this point.
- To schedule group tours or for more information, contact:

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Cultural attractions abound in the scenic lakes region of northwest Iowa. While in the area, enjoy historic Arnolds Park Amusement Park, learn about area history at the Dickinson County Historical Museum, visit the Lakes Art Center, see the Maritime Museum, and cruise the lake on the Queen II replica of the famous 1884 steamship.

Gardner Cabin is owned and operated by the State Historical Society of Iowa and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.