



Interpretation, Education, and Visitor Experience Strategic Plan: 2025-2028

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Purpose of this Strategic Plan

Plan Scope

This plan is intended to guide the Interpretation, Education, and Visitor Experience Division at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site (BEOL) for the next THREE YEARS.

This plan will be the driving force for decision making for division operations moving forward, assisting staff with making decisions based upon available resources and capacity.

Need for a Strategic Plan

The BEOL Interpretation, Education, and Visitor Experience (IEVE) Division constantly needs to adjust the way we interpret nationally significant stories and how we connect our visitors to the site.

BEOL IEVE must prioritize work and focus on moving in a clear direction.

NPS policy recommends a strategic plan to define where we intend to take our work.

Background on Interpretation at Bent's Old Fort NHS

From 1963 to 1976, National Park Service Interpretation at the site focused on the foundation of the fort site and used it to interpret a variety of stories. In 1976, the reconstructed fort opened to the public. With it, the park relied on first person living history almost exclusively for its first few decades. Its focus was restricted to the 1833-49 trading post during the Bent period of habitation.

This singular focus and singular method did not lend itself well to interpreting the multiple cultures present here, and as a result, interpretation overemphasized upper class employees and reinforced romantic popular culture around mountain men. Furthermore, it tended to ignore everything that occurred at the site prior to 1833 and after 1849, despite the original congressional intent directing a more expanded emphasis. Focusing on one sixteen-year period and one form of interpretation also limited the ability to contextualize the story of the site within the larger histories of the region and the United States.

One of the major issues was a reliance on showcasing period skills rather than focusing on the interpretive stories that made the site important. Beginning in 2019, the site began to transition away from first person to third person. There was still a strong focus on showing period skills over interpreting stories, though that also slowly began to change.

For close to fifty years, BEOL has been one dimensional in both its interpretive methodology and storytelling. At times, we've ignored, minimized, and excluded some stakeholders by overemphasizing some stories or perspectives above others. This contributed to a steady decline in

annual visitation numbers from over 100,000 visitors when the reconstructed fort opened during America's 1976 Bicentennial, to under 20,000 in recent years.

By expanding the stories we tell, diversifying how we tell them, and including additional perspectives that were previously minimized, we will have the capacity to tell a more complete story. This new expanded approach will reinvigorate the staff, stakeholders, and the visitor experience. In addition, this will put us in a better position to navigate the continuing uncertainties surrounding the reconstructed fort.

The Planning Process

The team followed the process under guidance by The Planning School.

1. Identify team members and roles
2. Identify stakeholders
3. Solicit stakeholders for input
4. Analyze previous factors leading to today's team posture
5. Complete SWOT analysis
6. Analyze realities and parameters
7. Define the plan's scope
8. Define the vision for change
9. Establish focus areas
10. Set goals for each focus area
11. Set milestones and actions for each year of the plan
12. Provide a draft plan review for stakeholders
13. Finalize the plan and began implementation

Planning Team

Planning team members have developed this plan with final approval and responsibility for decisions by Program Manager for IEVE, Jake Koch, and Lead Park Ranger, Mario Medina, as the team leads.

- Beth Dodd
- Bill Holcombe
- Jake Koch
- Mario Medina
- Diana Ocheltree

Vision for Change

By 2028, create a fresh interpretive experience at Bent's Old Fort NHS which inspires visitors, staff, volunteers, and partners.

Development of this vision statement

The planning team co-authored this statement after:

- Analysis of the team's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- Analysis of stakeholder survey results and current state presentation feedback
- Analysis of realities and trends

Focus Areas

Grow Interpretive Programming

To deliver a “refreshed” visitor experience.

Goal

Expand programming to include multiple forms of interpretation.

Milestones

<i>Planning Year</i>	<i>FY2026</i>	<i>FY2027</i>	<i>FY2028</i>
<i>Milestones</i>	Add at least two interpretive programs that do not require the use of the reconstructed fort.	Create at least three unique interpretive experiences such as campfire programs, historic weapons demonstrations, natural resource programming (i.e. birding), or cultural demonstrations in conjunction with our affiliated tribes.	Develop unique programs interpreting collective memory and commemoration.
<i>Known Commitments</i>			
<i>Stop, pause, re-allocate</i>			

Expand Our Knowledge Base

To better contextualize a more complete story.

Goal

Connect with at least five academic resources and institutions to modernize scholarship so that we can expand our scope of interpretive focus and better contextualize a more complete story.

Milestones

<i>Planning Year</i>	<i>FY2026</i>	<i>FY2027</i>	<i>FY2028</i>
<i>Milestones</i>	Forge a better working relationship through regular communication with universities and History Colorado.	Incorporate expanded research into interpretive content with at least five new programs linked to specific research previously overlooked.	Partner with academic institutions and History Colorado to co-present quarterly interpretive programming based upon the expanded stories and context.
<i>Known Commitments</i>			
<i>Stop, pause, re-allocate</i>			

Revitalize Volunteer Program

To align our volunteer opportunities with the fresh visitor experiences.

Goal

Retain current volunteers, expand the scope of volunteer opportunities beyond a living history focus, and adjust the volunteer program and volunteer training to meet those changes.

Milestones

<i>Planning Year</i>	<i>FY2026</i>	<i>FY2027</i>	<i>FY2028</i>
<i>Milestones</i>	Offer quarterly training opportunities communicating the new focus areas of park interpretation, how volunteers fit into it, and improve living history interpretation to retain any current volunteers.	Recruit and train new interpretive volunteers with a planned, targeted approach. Recruit at least three uniformed volunteers to assist staff on a regularly scheduled basis.	Have a large, trained cadre of volunteers that are collectively prepared to interpret each topic of our expanded interpretive focus.
<i>Known Commitments</i>			
<i>Stop, pause, re-allocate</i>			

Forge Community Connections

To partner with different organizations in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Goal

Forge connections with three or more stakeholder communities.

Milestones

<i>Planning Year</i>	<i>FY2026</i>	<i>FY2027</i>	<i>FY2028</i>
<i>Milestones</i>	Lay the groundwork by arranging meetings with our stakeholders to share our vision and collectively brainstorm ways we can assist each other.	Begin to formulate plans for mutual assistance moving forward.	Realize plans developed in year two through at least quarterly partnership opportunities either through programming, staffing, research, or training.
<i>Known Commitments</i>			
<i>Stop, pause, re-allocate</i>			

Execution Commitments

Purpose of the Execution Team

To progress the work outlined in the BEOL IEVE Strategic Plan.

Current Members of the Execution Team

Jake Koch, Mario Medina, Diana Ocheltree

Frequency/Duration

The Execution Team will meet following the first BEOL IEVE Staff Meeting each month for 30 minutes. Execution Team members may be assigned leadership roles on task force team(s) to accomplish milestones and action items.

Required Resources

The BEOL IEVE Strategic Plan and Annual Workplan.

Standing Agenda

1. OPEN: The facilitator opens by stating the plan's directional components (for example, read the Vision for Change and the Strategic Focus Areas with Goals).
2. Members take turns sharing. For each milestone or action step, they are responsible for:
 - a. What has happened since the last meeting
 - b. Any celebrations/milestones reached
 - c. Any roadblocks or challenges or emergent information
 - d. Operational needs
3. Commitments for the next month of work
4. Throughout the meeting: shift, remove, or add work to the schedule and adjust timeline as needed.
5. CLOSEOUT: Notetaker summarizes upcoming work commitments and any other decisions that come from the conversations. Identify any information/updates that should be shared more broadly (staff, stakeholders) and how that communication will happen.

Additional Meeting Agreements

Pre-work

Members come prepared to share updates about the progress of the work they are responsible for and ask for support with any potential roadblocks.

Facilitation

Members take turns facilitating the meetings.

Note-Taking

Members take turns as note-takers and record-keepers. Facilitation and note-taking cannot be done by the same person at the same time (share the load!).

Annual Strategic Plan Check-In Process

Annually in August, we commit to a one-day meeting to review our successes and challenges and look ahead to future years of our plan. During our annual meeting, we will create the 12-month detailed breakdown for the upcoming fiscal year. We will report on our Annual Workplan at the next IEV staff meeting.