

## America's home town: fiction, Mark Twain, and the re-creation of Hannibal, Missouri

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Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name Mark Twain, is one of America's best known novelists. He wrote what many literary critics consider the first 'Great American Novel', *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in 1884. This book and his earlier novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), are based partly on his boyhood experiences living on the Mississippi River and in the town of Hannibal, Missouri. While Twain is best known as a humorist who pointed out satirical situations in everyday life, by the late nineteenth century he wrote extensively about social justice issues, making explicit commentaries on imperialism, labour, and racism. After Twain's death in 1910 the citizens of Hannibal worked diligently to strengthen the connection between Mark Twain and Hannibal in order to make Mark Twain and their city part of the national public memory despite him living there only a portion of his 75 years.

**Keywords:** Mark Twain; Hannibal; Missouri; memory; race; heritage

Hannibal, Missouri lies on the western shore of the Mississippi River with a dwindling population of fewer than 18,000 people. Its existence today as a tourist destination is mostly dependent on people knowing it as Mark Twain's boyhood home. Hannibal is now an international destination and the town focuses heavily on exploiting Twain's fictitious characters for its economic survival. After walking through the town, it is easy to come away with the impression that Hannibal has not only been frozen in time – the 1840s and 1850s – but has also been frozen in a novel: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Many of the town's buildings, souvenir shops and restaurants have a Tom Sawyer theme. Several square blocks of Hannibal have an environment that has a carefully controlled message – *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* – and appears to be a place for safe entertainment. Crime and decay have been removed to the outskirts of the historic district and few residents wander into the tourist area. The historic area conveys a theme park atmosphere, a type of Disneyfication that supports the ideals of the fictitious characters associated with a novel.

There is a disconnect for some visitors between what Hannibal now interprets to the public and what some audiences expect of a town that commemorates Mark Twain. Those who come to Hannibal to honour a man who railed against social inequality with the writings of *Huckleberry Finn* and his later books and essays are often disappointed to experience a *Tom Sawyer* theme park. As James Loewen (1999, p. 148) writes, 'Not just Aunt Polly's fence gets whitewashed in Hannibal – so does

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Mark Twain.' At the turn of the twenty-first century others, like Leftridge (2002) and Dempsey (2003), have been critical of how the town, which functions as museum, is being interpreted to the public. Social justice issues are not addressed and interpretations of slavery have, for a long time, been absent in the town.

Ron Powers' (2001) book *Huck Doesn't Live Here Anymore* also challenges the idealistic portrait of the town, which the chamber of commerce markets as 'America's home town.' The author describes what Hannibal means to many of the youth being raised in the community today. With a decaying downtown except for a few blocks of souvenir shops and tourist attractions, the adolescents have little to turn to. While disguised as 'America's home town', the community has many of the problems found in other urban communities. The stimulus for writing the book is the senseless murders of two adults by two sets of teens in a relatively short period of time. While many visitors to Hannibal are searching for meaning and/or entertainment, for many of the teens growing up in the community, Hannibal is meaningless and they look to escape the boredom and tedium of small town America.

The meaning of Hannibal is a contested terrain as disenfranchised groups call for change. John Urry (1990) explains that at any tourist site new meaning can be created and old meanings can be reinforced. Not everybody will see the place the same way, particularly those excluded from the construction of the meaning of the place. The town leaders and museum staff associated with the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum have, for a long time, reinforced a mostly apolitical interpretation of the place by ignoring Twain's call for social justice. The critiques from the local (Dempsey 2003) and the national (Leftridge 2002, Loewen 1999, Powers 2003) levels have led to some changes in recent years and the interpretive centre has begun to address this issue with the addition of new exhibits.

### Samuel Clemens becomes Mark Twain

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri in 1835. While he was the sixth born of seven children, only three, including Sam, reached adulthood. Today a red granite monument marks the original site of Samuel Clemens' birthplace, and the two-room cabin in which Sam was born now sits within a larger museum that is surrounded by almost 3000 acres of recreational parkland (Figure 1). When Sam was 4 years old, his family moved to Hannibal. In 1847 his father died, and the next year, at the age of 12, Sam became a printer's apprentice. He later worked as a typesetter for his brother's newspaper, the *Hannibal Journal*. When he was 18 years old Sam left Hannibal to work as a printer in New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and St. Louis. At the age of 22 he returned to Hannibal and in 1859 earned his steamboat pilot licence. Hannibal reached its economic peak during the steamboat era and it served as a small commercial port and a slave-trading centre (Foner 1958, pp. 9–17).

In 1861, Sam's brother Orion was appointed as secretary to the governor of the Territory of Nevada, and he and Sam began their new adventure together. Sam tried mining for a while, and then worked for a newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada, where he first used his pen name, Mark Twain. Twain continued working as a journalist in San Francisco, and was paid by newspapers to travel abroad and describe foreign places. His trip to the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii, was well received, and his subsequent travels to the Mediterranean became the foundation for his book *The Innocents Abroad* (1929 [1869]).

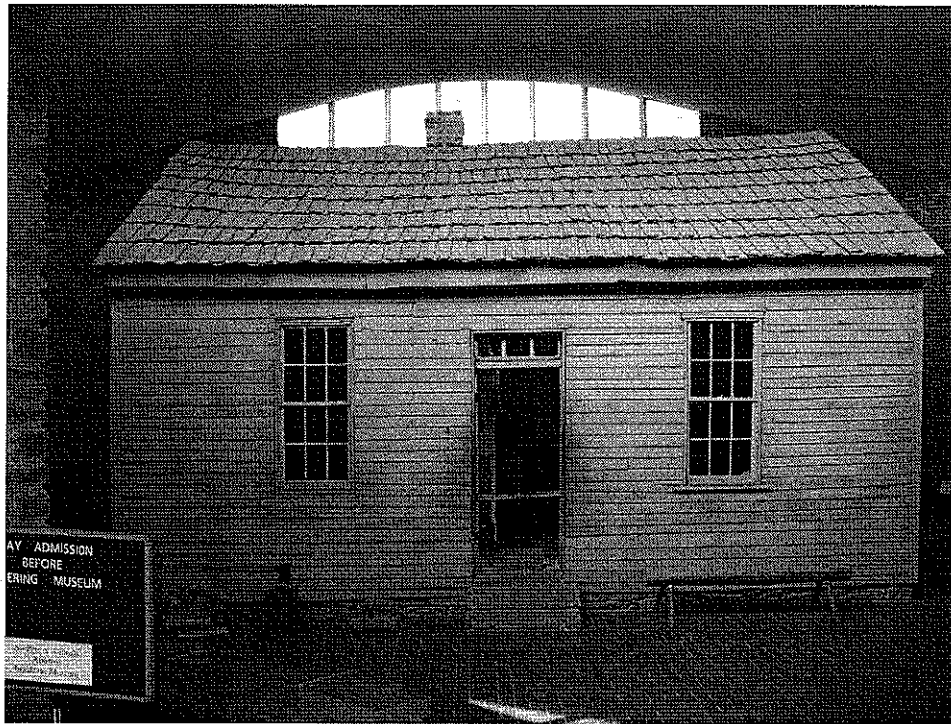


Figure 1. Mark Twain's birthplace home located inside a museum at the Mark Twain Birthplace State Historic Site. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.

Twain married Olivia Langdon in 1870 and they lived in Buffalo for a short time where he had a stake in the *Buffalo Express*. The Langdons were a wealthy family from Elmira, New York, that supported the abolitionist movement, women's rights and other social causes. After the death of their son Langdon at 19 months, Mark Twain and Olivia moved to Hartford, where their three daughters were born: Susy, Clara and Jean. It was in Hartford, as well as during summer trips to Elmira, that Twain wrote some of his best known works: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1935a [1876]), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1996 [1881]), *Life on the Mississippi* (1935c [1883]), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1985 [1884]), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1935b [1889]).

While Twain's early writings as a humorist emphasised social and political satire, by his mid-career he tackled the issue of the dilemma of racism in a divided country. By the 1890s, he was writing books and other essays that criticised racism, imperialism and organised religion. Despite his emphasis on social justice issues, many Americans are hardly aware of Twain's writings on these topics. While Hannibal identifies itself as 'America's Home Town', the City of Hannibal, which is diligent in keeping the memory of Twain alive, mostly ignores his views related to social justice. Recent renovations to the exhibition space at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum interpretive centre have answered some of this criticism by placing Mark Twain's life within the larger social and political context of antebellum United States. Issues of enslavement are now addressed in this museum. The interpretation acknowledges that his family once owned slaves and, using Twain's writings, the exhibit explains how



Figure 2. Hannibal: America's Home Town found near the entrance of downtown Hannibal. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.

his views of slavery changed over time (Figure 2). While the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum interpretive centre is now addressing some important questions related to race and racism in the nineteenth-century United States, much of the historic district which celebrates Twain avoids interpreting his views about social justice.

#### **Twain's record on social justice issues**

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1976[1884]) is considered by many as the Great American Novel. The story mirrors the life of Mark Twain. Twain grew up in Hannibal, and slavery was part of his everyday life. Twain (1990, p. 8) wrote in his autobiography:

In my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind – and then the texts were read aloud to us to make the matter sure; if the slaves themselves had an aversion to slavery they were wise and said nothing. In Hannibal we seldom saw a slave misused; on a farm never.

He wrote about his mother's unquestioning attitude toward slavery:

I think she was not conscious that slavery was a bald, grotesque and unwarrantable usurpation. She had never heard it assailed in any pulpit but had heard it defended and sanctified in a thousand; her ears were familiar with Bible texts that approved it but if there

were any that disapproved it they had not been quoted by her pastor; as far as her experience went, the wise and the good and the holy were unanimous in the conviction that slavery was right, righteous, sacred... (Twain 1990, pp. 38–39)

An incident touched Mark Twain deeply in his boyhood. He remembered a young slave boy from the eastern shore of Maryland who was separated from his family. He was always cheery, 'the noisiest creature', explained Twain. Finally he couldn't stand it and he asked his mother to shut him up.

The tears came into her eyes and her lip trembled and she said something like this: 'Poor thing, when he sings it shows that he is not remembering and that comforts me; but when he is still I am afraid he is thinking and I cannot bear it. He will never see his mother again; if he can sing I must not hinder it, but be thankful for it. If you were older you would understand me; then the friendless child's noise would make you glad'. (Twain 1990, p. 9)

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's first major commentary on slavery, his main character, Huck Finn, is floating down the Mississippi River with the escaped slave, Jim. They are escaping from tyranny and Huck is not comfortable with the role of abolitionist (Robinson 1995, p. xiii). Twain recognised the problem with slavery and the transformation that Huck Finn goes through, struggling with the concept before finally denouncing it. Huck denounces slavery by helping Jim escape, even if it means going against the pulpit. Huck exclaims, 'All right, then, I'll go to hell. ... It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming' (Twain 1985, p. 237). Huck chooses eternal damnation over conforming to society and theology's sanction of the enslavement of humans. Huck and Jim float down the Mississippi River, together running away from society and seeking freedom. Huck questions his own intentions several times during the journey.

The change of Huck's view of the institution of slavery is similar to Twain's changing perspective at the beginning of the Civil War. Twain joined the Marion Rangers of Missouri State Guard at the outbreak of the Civil War, resigned two weeks later, and spent the rest of the war in Nevada. He explained that he was 'incapacitated by fatigue through persistent retreating' (Twain 1990, p. 134). Leaving the Guard may represent a moral act, and *Huckleberry Finn* may represent Twain's desertion of Confederate nationalism. The story is about the challenges and dilemma and guilt of changing views or changing sides. Twain was often criticised by post-Civil War Southern sympathisers for his change in heart, and for condemning the institution of slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*. Noted Twain scholar Louis Budd (1962) referred to him as a 'scalawag' because of his post-war activities addressing the Grand Army of the Republic and toasting Union generals.

By the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, Twain continued to challenge perceptions of racism. He authored 'The United States of Lyncherdom' (1963a [1901]), which was published in a collection of essays after his death in 1923, at the height of the Ku Klux Klan. In it, Twain rails against the horrors of racism and also writes about mob mentality, which he claims can afflict most people. He suggests that the missionaries in China are spreading the malady of western civilisation; they should, instead, come home to the United States and 'convert these Christians!'

Twain also challenged other injustices in the world. For instance, he took on a passionate anti-colonialism campaign from the late 1890s and into the twentieth century. He raged against the annexation of the Philippines after the Spanish–American

War (1898) in his 'To the Person Sitting in Darkness' (1963b [1901]). During his equatorial tour of 1895–96, he lectured about the greed and power lust that drove 'the civilization trust' (Carton 1995, p. 159). Twain made the world aware of the vicious exploitation of Cecil Rhodes' South African Company, calling him 'an Archangel with wings to half the world, Satan with a tail to the other half' in *Follow the Equator* (Gillman 1995, p. 196).

He wrote about Czar Nicholas II's exploitation and rule over Russians, Poles and Finns in 'The Czar's Soliloquy' (1905a). He also railed against King Leopold of Belgium as he ruled and exploited the people of the Congo with fear, threat, mutilation and massive genocide in order to exploit the rubber resources in 'King Leopold's Soliloquy' (1905b). The United States officially recognised the king's rule and did nothing to stop American capitalists such as J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller and Daniel Guggenheim from bankrolling these endeavours (Carton 1995, p. 160). In Twain's autobiography he wrote:

The royal palace of Belgium is still what it has been for fourteen years, the den of a wild beast, King Leopold II, who for money's sake mutilates, murders and starves half a million of friendless and helpless poor natives in the Congo State every year, and does it by the silent consent of all of the Christian powers except England, none of them lifting a hand or a voice to stop these atrocities ... In fourteen years Leopold has deliberately destroyed more lives than have suffered death on all the battlefields of this planet for the past thousand years. (Twain 1990, p. 356)

Twain later stated that even though we had advanced into the most enlightened century (the early twentieth century), this era is marked by

the ghastly distinction of having produced this moldy and piety-mouthing hypocrite, this bloody monster whose mate is not findable in human history anywhere, and whose personality will surely shame hell itself when he arrives there – which will be soon, let us hope and trust. (Twain 1990, p. 356)

Twain also wrote about the inequities apparent in a class system found in capitalism. In his autobiography he wrote:

In the small town of Hannibal, Missouri, when I was a boy everybody was poor but didn't know it; and everybody was comfortable and did know it. And there were grades of society – people of good family, people of unclassified family, people of no family. Everybody knew everybody and was affable to everybody and nobody put on any visible airs; yet the class lines were quite clearly drawn and the familiar social life of each class was restricted to that class. It was a little democracy which was full of liberty, equality and Fourth of July, and sincerely so, too; yet you perceived that the aristocratic taint was there. It was there and nobody found fault with the fact or even stopped to reflect that its presence was an inconsistency. (Twain 1990, p. 37)

Twain was critical of capitalism, the accumulation of wealth and forms of exploitation, which he termed 'The Gilded Age'. In his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the main character, Hank Morgan, a late nineteenth-century machinist, travels back in time to Arthurian England. The book highlights class issues in the middle ages, calling attention to the poor working class in nineteenth-century society. Morgan equates his sixth-century social conditions with the slaveholding American south. Morgan also explains that most of the subjects in the British nation were enslaved, and he later explained that, 'a privileged class, an aristocracy, is but a band of slaveholders

under another name' (quoted in Carton 1995, p. 168). Many contemporaries saw *Connecticut Yankee* as an endorsement of the new labour movement in the United States. Twain supported the Knights of Labor and he studied its 1878 manifesto of 'Wrongs and Demands'. In 1886, he told the Hartford Monday Evening Club, an audience of businessmen and professionals: 'Who are the oppressors? The few: the kings, the capitalists, and a handful of overseers and superintendents. Who are the oppressed? The many' (quoted in Carton 1995, p. 169).

In Twain's autobiography he critiqued the monarchies as well as the people who blindly supported the institution, calling it a type of slavery. He explained:

So doubtless are the far more intelligent slaves of a monarchy; they revere and approve their masters, the monarch and the noble, and recognize no degradation in the fact that they are slaves – slaves with the name blinked, and less respectable than were our black ones, if to be a slave by meek consent is baser than to be a slave by compulsion – and doubtless it is. (Twain 1990, p. 39)

He also abhorred the Belgium monarch and he had a few choice words for the Russian monarch.

Cruel and pitiful as was life throughout Christendom in the Middle Ages, it was not as cruel, not as pitiful, as is life in Russia today. In Russia for three centuries the vast population has been ground under the heels, and for the sole and sordid advantage of a procession of crowned assassins and robbers who have all deserved the gallows. (Twain 1990, p. 356)

These harsh conditions will continue, Twain explained, as long as the Czardom continues to exist.

### **Sacralisation of places**

While Mark Twain is on record for denouncing many of the injustices of his time, such as racism, imperialism and classism, visitors to Hannibal find an apolitical terrain. The meaning of the town as a sacred apolitical place is being challenged to provide a more comprehensive view of the breadth and depth of the author's writings. Dean MacCannell (1976) discusses the process of 'sacralisation' whereby people mark, protect and create a boundary around a place or an object in order to commemorate an event. Places can become sacralised either through the marking of districts or the re-creation of places. The commemoration that occurs within these boundaries creates and reinforces a predetermined narrative. Hannibal, Missouri, along with many other places, has become part of a long tradition of American towns creating an imaginary past at a sacred place to sustain contemporary social and political values. These values and the meanings of places are always in flux, being challenged by those who consider themselves outside of the dominant narrative.

For instance, places like Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts and Jamestown in Virginia are being used to support the American founding myths. Both Plimoth Plantation and Jamestown are places rediscovered through the process of archaeology. Artefacts from the excavations are on display in an adjacent museum while the world of the Anglo founders is re-created at the site (see for instance Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1997).

The story of America's founding myths has been challenged and changed with each generation. For instance, when James Deetz came to Plimoth Plantation as its Assistant

Director, he transformed Plimoth from an outdoor museum to a living history museum. Ancestor worship was transformed to ethnohistory. Wax mannequins and inaccurate artefacts were removed from the museum. While Deetz was trying to create a more realistic view of the original settlement using archaeological evidence, initially the public viewed this change unfavourably (Snow 2003, Magelssen 2007).

Scholars have also shown how Williamsburg, Virginia, helps to reify a class structure by exhibiting capitalism's deeply rooted past. While providing a very white history for decades, challenges have enabled the interpretive division to now incorporate African American history (Wallace 1981, Handler and Gable 1997). Magelssen (2007) argues that the living histories at places like Williamsburg and Plimoth are less about interpreting the past and more about the social and political context of the present.

The Henry Ford (THF) (which contains the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village) focuses on the production of mass consumption items like furniture, electronics and cars. The museum celebrates progress while it sits in the midst of a devastated industrial and urban landscape (Barndt 2007, pp. 383–384). Greenfield Village is a landscape that conveys a peaceful relationship between pre-industrial and industrial America. There is no mention of the tensions between labour and capital, such as Ford's fight against unionisation, or any detail of labour strikes. Power struggles never intrude on this 'static utopia'. It is a corporate employer's vision of history (Wallace 1986, pp. 145–148). 'THF has catapulted Henry Ford's original ideas into the present time without losing site of his original ideological aim to reconcile corporate, public, and national history' (Barndt 2007, p. 399).

Other notable fabricated landscapes that have become sacralised include New Salem, Illinois, which was a frontier town where Abraham Lincoln lived from 1831 to 1837. Abandoned in the 1840s, it was rebuilt in the early 1900s. Today it is a pristine park that serves as a national shrine and reinforces Lincoln's 'log cabin to the White House' story (Bruner 1994, p. 399, Taylor and Johnson 2004, p. 181). Places like Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia removed late nineteenth-century buildings in order to freeze the landscape in the 1860s. The goal was to interpret the events surrounding the Civil War, including John Brown's raid on the town. Today, there are noticeable amounts of open space that create landscape that memorialises the event (Moyer and Shackel 2008). Other places like Monterey, California, celebrate its working class heritage by using John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row* to attract visitors. Boutique shops and restaurants line the main streets.

All of these places are landscapes with clear boundaries that convey a message that supports the dominant narrative, and in many of these cases the official meaning of the places excludes alternative voices. For a long time, the chamber of commerce in Hannibal chose to attract visitors to the town by developing an apolitical theme associated with Mark Twain. However, the apolitical theme meant that other stories and voices were omitted from the public interpretation of Mark Twain. The development of the Tom Sawyer theme was made explicit from the very early stages of the town's tourism development.

### **The making of Hannibal**

Mark Twain died on 21 April 1910, and soon after his death the city leaders of Hannibal began to commemorate him. Scheduled for demolition in 1911, the house where the Clemens family lived was purchased by George A. Mahan. After the



Clemens family left Hannibal in 1853, the wood framed structure became a rental property and it fell into disrepair. Mahan repaired the house and donated it to the City of Hannibal in 1912. The Boyhood Home has been open to the public since then, and it is one of the earlier historic house preservation projects in the United States. Initially, the parlour was open to the public and a caretaker lived in the rest of the house. The building has been subsequently placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is designated as a National Historic Landmark (MTBHM 2009).

After 1916, official-looking signs sanctioned by the state of Missouri, like the historical markers found elsewhere, began to appear throughout Hannibal. The signs identified many fictitious places like the whitewashed fence associated with Tom Sawyer, Becky Thatcher's house and, up until recently, the vacant lot where Huckleberry Finn's house once stood (Leftridge 2002, p. 4). In 1935, the Mark Twain Centennial Commission based in Manhattan kept 100 candles burning for a full year. That same year President Franklin Roosevelt activated a lighthouse above Hannibal. The town had a variety of festivities, including a mass fence painting. Works Progress Administration funding helped to build the Mark Twain Museum, which sits adjacent to the boyhood home. At that time the caretaker moved into the upper floors and the entire main level of the house became accessible to visitors (Budd 1995, pp. 20–21, MTBHM 2009).

In the early twentieth century Hannibal lost much of its manufacturing and port trading. City leaders selected Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to celebrate and to use as a focus for tourism. Mark Twain's writings and political views on class, the monarchy, US expansionism and race were absent in the celebration of his life. Today, Hannibal is filled with reminders of Mark Twain and it continues to be a memorial to his most famous, and apolitical, character – Tom Sawyer.

Tom Sawyer is an imaginative and mischievous boy who has many exciting adventures with his friends while living in a port town on the Mississippi River. In one episode, Tom convinces his friends to pay him trinkets for the privilege of doing his work – whitewashing a fence. In another scene Tom, Huckleberry Finn and Joe Harper run away to an island to become pirates. While looking for treasure Tom goes to town and he and Becky Thatcher get lost in the cave and come across a fugitive, Injun Joe. Eventually Tom finds a way out and Becky's father, Judge Thatcher, locks up the cave, trapping Injun Joe, who starves to death. Tom and Huck return to the cave and find the box of gold. At the end of the novel Huck joins Tom's playful robber band.

Today, the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum consist of several properties owned by the city of Hannibal in the custodianship of the Mark Twain Home Board. These buildings are used to interpret the Mark Twain story. These museum properties include the interpretive centre, Mark Twain's Boyhood Home, Huckleberry Finn's House, Becky Thatcher's House, J.M. Clemens Justice of the Peace's Office, Grant's Drug Store/Pilaster House and the Museum gallery. The town's historic district is filled with many nineteenth-century buildings that contain boutique shops and restaurants named after several of the novel's characters, or Twain himself, like the Mark Twain Dinette, the Jumping Frog Cafe, Becky Thatcher Restaurant, and Sawyers Creek, to name a few.

According to the Missouri Division of Tourism, an estimated 500,000 people visit Hannibal each year. The survey indicates that most people visit the place because they were familiar with Twain's writings; however, the survey does not indicate which writings (Card 2002). Hannibal is an international destination and, unlike many Americans, the international tourists tend to be more aware of the extensiveness of

Twain's writings. Those who are familiar with the breadth of Twain's literary work visit the town and expect to learn more about how the man came to detest slavery, racism, class difference, imperialism and unfair labour practices. For instance, one Japanese visitor explained the reason for his visit by stating that, 'The Japanese like Twain's passion for social justice' (quoted in Leftridge 2002, p. 4). However, Mark Twain, the man who campaigned for social justice, is not present in the town. Hannibal is not about interpreting social justice and some visitors, like myself, are disappointed, and maybe a bit confused or disoriented when they experience a Tom Sawyer-like theme park. Hannibal survived in the antebellum era as a slave trading port and walking through the town it is easy to see that they have whitewashed over this part of their history. A new exhibit located in the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum places Mark Twain's life within the context of racism in the south. It also mentions the Clemens family owning and renting slaves. Clearly, the museum is modernising its interpretations, although there are still many contrasts throughout the city.

At the turn of the twenty-first century the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum invited visitors to:

tour the authentically restored boyhood home of Mark Twain and experience the inspiration for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* ... [You will hear] the parlor conversations that inspired ... Twain. By the time you leave the home you will imagine Tom is 'letting' the neighborhood boys white wash the fence. (Hannibal Convention & Visitors Bureau 2003)

The Boyhood Home is the most visited site in Hannibal. Today, the interpretation of Mark Twain's Boyhood Home has changed somewhat. You are no longer hooked into the Tom Sawyer story. Rather, a few new interpretive signs throughout the house now have quotes from Twain's various works describing life in Hannibal as well as describing life in the house. But of course, before you leave the home complex you enter a gift shop filled with Twain memorabilia, as well as many items with a Tom Sawyer theme.

However, the city continues to refer to *Tom Sawyer* as historical fact rather than what it is – a novel. For instance, in front of the Boyhood Home is a cast-iron state historic marker that describes Tom Sawyer's fence. As though the event in the novel actually happened, the marker states, 'Here stood the board fence which Tom Sawyer persuaded his gang to pay him for the privilege of whitewashing. Tom sat by and saw that it was well done' (Figure 3). In reality, the fence is a recent creation to interpret the novel.

Across the street from the boyhood home is the second most visited site – the house where Laura Hawkins once lived. Laura was immortalised in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as Becky Thatcher. A cast-iron historic marker outside of the house identifies it as the 'Becky Thatcher Home'. The sign reads, 'This was the home of Becky Thatcher, Tom Sawyer's first sweetheart in Mark Twain's book *Tom Sawyer*. Tom thought Becky to be the essence of all that is charming in womanhood' (Figure 4). Given the way the marker is written the visitor can easily be misguided to believe that the novel character is, in fact, real.

Other highlights identified in the Hannibal Convention & Visitors Bureau (2003, 2010) brochure include Mark Twain's Cave, which served as an important setting in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It is in this cave, purportedly, where Tom and Becky get lost and spot the fugitive, Injun Joe. The brochure notes that, 'you will have the same experience exploring this remarkable cave as Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher

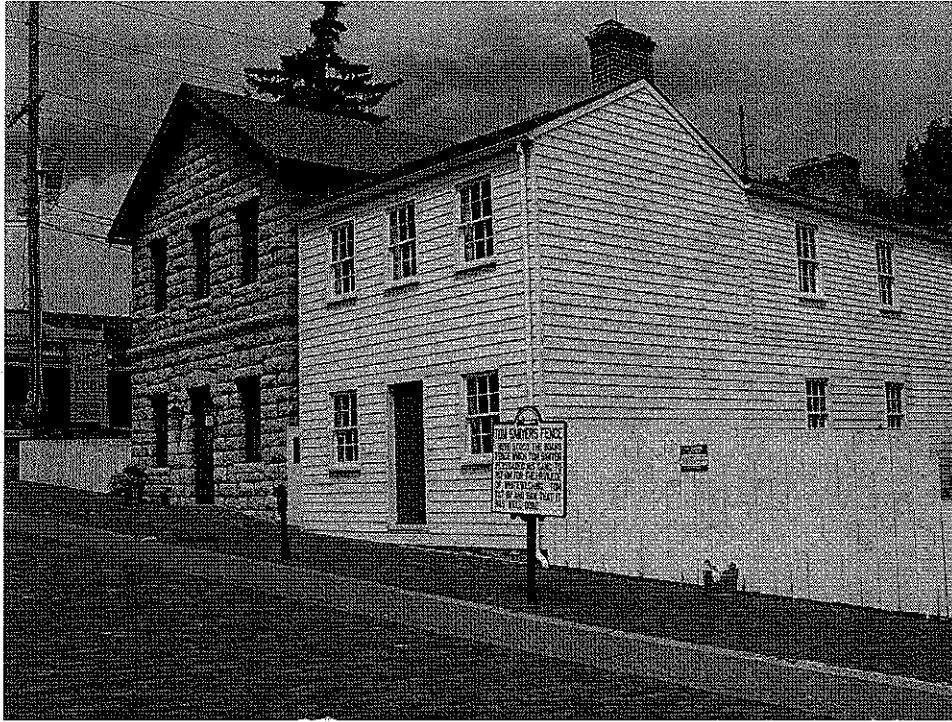


Figure 3. State historic marker describing the board fence that Tom Sawyer enticed his friends to paint. The fence is adjacent to the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and it is a twentieth century reconstruction to make connection to the novel *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.

did many years ago' (Hannibal 2003). The Mississippi River Boat named *Mark Twain* and a mall and amusement park called Sawyer's Creek Fun Park are also featured in the brochure. To get around town there are the 'Twainland Express Sightseeing Tours'. In town there is the Old Jail Museum, a restored jail on the National Register of Historic Places, which boasts of having a gift and rock shop and an albino deer display (Hannibal 2003, 2010).

### **Transition or inconsistency, political or apolitical**

The long-time use of *Tom Sawyer* to help create a Mark Twain theme-like park in Hannibal, Missouri, was intentionally created by the city's forefathers soon after the author's death. Ignoring the town's history as well as the other compelling stories related to Mark Twain's writings about social justice may seem purposefully apolitical, but in reality it is very political. Issues that have social, economic and political weight – issues that include race, gender, class, and labour – are all important concerns in our lives today. To ignore these topics is an irresponsible act and it overlooks the complex social history of the town and the social and political activism of Mark Twain.

For me, reading Mark Twain's works provides context for not only understanding the complexities of interpreting a town like Hannibal, but it also provides important social and political context for life in nineteenth-century America. Twain wrote his most famous work when Americans were re-evaluating their worldviews and their

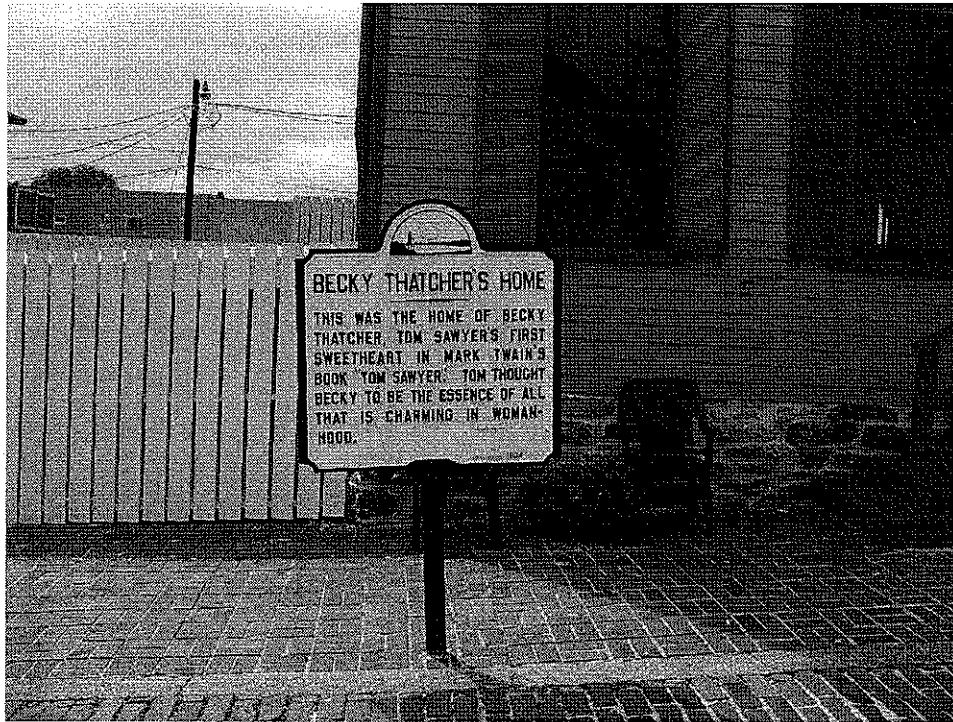


Figure 4. State historic marker that claims the house that Laura Hawkins lived in, the person whom Mark Twain used as a model for Beck Thatcher in his novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, is the Becky Thatcher House. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.

ideas about race. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1985 [1884]) is about the conflict over enslaving people and was written in a time when Americans remembered the Civil War, with Reconstruction still on their minds. While the Civil War led to legal emancipation, Reconstruction failed to establish the conditions of freedom realised by emancipation. Former slaves returned to a different form of servitude. Therefore, *Huckleberry Finn* is not only about slavery, but it is also about the dilemma of failed Reconstruction (Jehlen 1995).

Hannibal has a darker side to its history, and with the Tom Sawyer theme it is difficult to find it in Hannibal. While *Huckleberry Finn* challenges our perceptions of racism, there are other myths worth challenging. For instance, Hannibal was a major shipping point for slaves, and at one point a dozen slave traders resided in and around Hannibal. There is also a long-standing myth that even though Missouri was a slave state, slavery was not as widespread when compared to other regions in the South. The statistics traditionally used state that 8–10% of the residents owned slaves. However, Terrell Dempsey (2003) reveals in his book *Searching for Jim: Slavery in Sam Clemens's World* that the rate is closer to 70%. He notes that only heads of households were recorded to have slaves and many families leased, rather than owned, enslaved people. Mark Twain's family was one of them. When considering these factors, there was a widespread use of enslaved labour in the area. This history is difficult to find in Hannibal.

'In March 2002 the Board of Directors of the Hannibal Historic District Development Commission validated their intent to continue the interpretive story of *Tom*

*Sawyer*' (Leftridge 2002, p. 46). The story of *Huckleberry Finn* and Twain's position on criticising slavery, capitalism and imperialism are overshadowed. Angela da Silva of the Black Tourism Network points out that, 'Hannibal has chosen to "edit" history and by doing so it does a grave injustice to humanity' (quoted in Leftridge 2002, p. 46). The majority of tourists said that they came to Hannibal because of Twain's writings; however, they see little more than Tom Sawyer. Only 2% of the visitors to Hannibal are not white. While the area surrounding Hannibal is largely white, larger African American urban centres exist nearby, such as St. Louis and Chicago. The social justice issues related to race are absent from many of the museums and other tourist destinations in town. It is no wonder that the town has virtually no minority tourists (Card 2002).

The tourism bureau refers to Hannibal as 'America's Home Town'. Its sanitised history leaves much untold. A Disney-like atmosphere is prevalent and tourists roam the streets shopping for antiques, unique gifts and fudge. It is a missed opportunity to tell a more complete story of the antebellum port town. Dempsey (2003, p. ix) writes:

The visitors and convention bureau and the Mark Twain Boyhood Home (never Sam Clemens) have cleaned up local history to match the Norman Rockwell-sanitized version of the town as a childhood paradise. It is a world where little freckled-faced white boys and blond pigtailed white girls frolic freely. It is a world of perpetually carefree youth.

Broadening the Museum's interpretation seemed possible when the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum developed plans to rebuild the Blankenship house. Mark Twain used Tom Blankenship as a model for his character Huckleberry Finn. The reconstructed house now sits on the lot where the Blankenships once lived and it is referred to in all of the tourist literature as 'The Huckleberry Finn House'. It stands about one block from Mark Twain's boyhood home (Figure 5). Making Huck Finn part of the Hannibal landscape is important because now Hannibal has the potential to expand its interpretation of the history of race, racism and class in the city as well as in the nation. Museum officials are excited about the reconstruction of the Huck Finn House because it 'provides visitors to Hannibal with a missing element, a look into a poor family's life along the Mississippi in the early 19th century' (Associated Press 2007).

The Blankenship home stood until 1911, when it was demolished; only a set of concrete steps remained on the lot along with a historic marker indicating that a house once stood there. The land was eventually donated to the Mark Twain Home Foundation. The family of Herb Parham, a retired attorney who served as the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum board's president from 1989 to 2005, donated money to pay for the reconstruction (Associated Press 2007).

The house is now widely referred to as the Huck Finn House, when in fact Huck Finn is a character in a novel. The representative I spoke to at the Hannibal Convention and Visitor's Bureau referred to the house as the Huck Finn House. When I challenged her on the accuracy of the naming of the place she conceded by saying that nobody would go there if they were told it was the Blankenship house. A docent in the interpretive centre at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum also referred to it as the Huck Finn House. When challenged, the docent conceded and agreed that it was where Tom Blankenship lived, the character that Mark Twain used to create Huck Finn.

The reconstruction was based upon a period photograph. Logs were donated by a family that had a log cabin located outside of town, and the foundation consists of

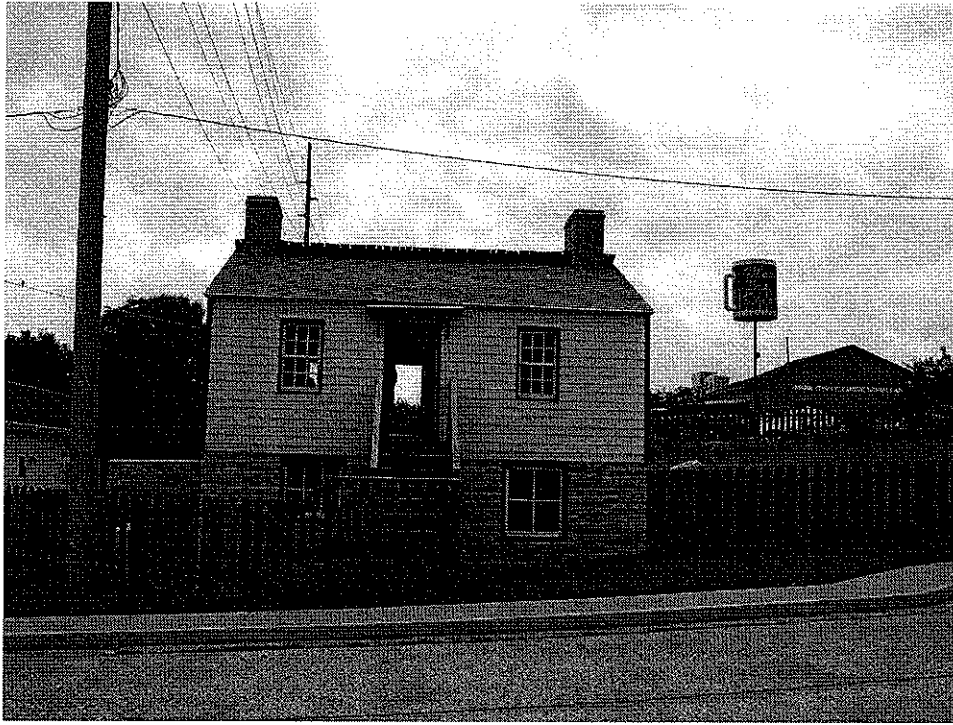


Figure 5. The reconstructed house where the Blankenship family once lived is interpreted as the Huck Finn House. The Mark Twain Dinette sign in the background. Photograph by Paul A. Shackel.

granite stone from a demolished Hannibal home. While no images exist of the interior of the Blankenship home, the interior reflects the 1840s and 1850s era (Associated Press 2007).

The interior is sparsely furnished, yet immaculate and pristine looking. The interpretive signage makes reference to the Blankenship family's lower status in the community. Other signage on the walls use quotations from Mark Twain's biography and autobiography to describe Tom Blankenship. Mark Twain's biographer described him as, 'an irresponsible bit of human drift, kind of heart, and possessing that priceless boon, absolute unaccountability of conduct to any living soul' (signage at Huckleberry Finn House 2010). The interpretive signage in the house is, I believe, a missed opportunity to expand the museum's interpretation of enslavement and racism in nineteenth-century United States. While Hannibal has become Mark Twain, the depth and breadth of Samuel Clemens is mostly absent in Hannibal.

#### **Moral relativism in Mark Twain's Hannibal**

Many heritage sites support apolitical views of history because those in charge of the narrative believe that this view allows them to avoid the conflict that often comes when multiple voices become part of the narrative. For instance, Jennifer Pustz (2009) notes that while house museums are increasingly incorporating women and racial minority groups into their interpretations, these stories are often portrayed in an idealistic framework that does not include class struggle or ethnic conflict. Introducing a

story that does not fit into the dominant narrative faces a set of challenges. Pustz shows how house museums can successfully interpret the life and work of servants. In her case study, tours of the kitchen and the servants' quarters have become more popular than the parlour part of the house tour.

There is a growing movement to make heritage sites places that support moral relativism, where differences are voiced and where a platform for reconciliation can be achieved. They can be places where communities see how the democratic process shapes our history and can allow for groups that have been traditionally marginalised to become part of the process of shaping the meaning of the place. In order to foster a democratic dialogue it is important to make the connections between the past and the present. Engaging people in a dialogue about their relationship to contested histories is a way of shaping a dialogue that addresses contemporary issues (Ševčenko and Russell-Ciardi 2008, pp. 11–12).

One example is the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The museum's mission is 'to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a gateway to America'. Over a dozen community organisations serving immigrant residents have collaborated with the museum on programming that uses history to orient and inspire new immigrant populations ([www.tenement.org](http://www.tenement.org)). The Tenement Museum is making history socially relevant to a traditionally disenfranchised group.

In the late 1990s the American Association of Museums (AAM) called for museums and historic places that convey local or global heritage to become places of learning, where people can use lessons of the past to address contemporary political and social issues. Making these links between the past and the present can facilitate an exploration of both historic and contemporary concerns related to social justice (AAM 2002). I believe it is important to know how these injustices developed and to realise why they exist today. In turn, this knowledge can inspire social consciousness and give citizens the option to act. The museum exhibit in the interpretive centre at the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum has made considerable strides to change the way Mark Twain is interpreted to the public. However, many of the buildings and interpretive signs on the city's streets continue to pretend to be the novel about Tom Sawyer and his adventures. Perhaps a fruitful adventure one day will be when the city leaders of Hannibal will see it as appropriate and socially relevant to make social justice a major part of Mark Twain's story.

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