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# LAUNCHING A PRESIDENT INTO THE DIGITAL AGE

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A Sophisticated Website Overhaul for the  
Nation's Premier Historic Site



# BACKGROUND

Andrew Jackson's Hermitage — historic home and 1,120-acre plantation of the former president in Nashville, TN — has welcomed over 15 million visitors from across the globe. Through careful preservation and educational as well as entertaining programming, The Hermitage's goal is to preserve a pivotal period in American history while educating the public about the fascinating, and often controversial, life of Andrew Jackson. With a new \$1.1 million exhibit opening in January 2015 and a visual rebranding underway, the marketing and leadership teams at The Hermitage recognized the need for an upgraded and revamped online presence to propel Andrew Jackson into the digital age.



# PROBLEM

The Hermitage is considered by many historians to be the most well-preserved early presidential home, and it sits on a sprawling farm complete with beautiful gardens and secluded hiking trails. The Hermitage agreed that the quality of the online experience did not accurately reflect the quality of the in-person experience.

Because the new exhibit was launching in a few short months, there would be quite a bit of attention on The Hermitage locally and industry-wide. Additionally, a revamped logo and visual brand were nearly complete. It was imperative that the online identity be overhauled to match this new brand and handle the upcoming traffic.

The site used a variety of third-party tools that made website management difficult for administrators. The site also had limited flexibility, preventing admin from easily updating information or adding content. This difficulty contributed to the site becoming disjointed and disorganized, compromising the experience for both users and admin.

*The Hermitage's previous online experience did not reflect their engaging in-person experience.*

One of the most significant issues was the lack of mobile functionality. With mobile usage growing steadily, it was imperative that the site be responsive. Search engine performance and social engagement were also areas for improvement.

## Goals

The Hermitage had several goals for the website redesign:

- Simplify navigation for users and admin.
- Increase ticket sales and streamline the purchase process.
- Reach 50,000 sessions per month.
- Improve the visual appeal with a modern but authentic aesthetic that coordinates with the new exhibit.
- Optimize for search engines.
- Better integrate social media.
- Educate the public about Andrew Jackson while dispelling misconceptions.
- Adopt a mobile-friendly, responsive design.
- Improve engagement.
- Accommodate all target audiences, maximizing usability and accessibility.
- Consolidate third-party tools.

In our initial proposal we detailed strategies for achieving each of these goals.

# SOLUTION

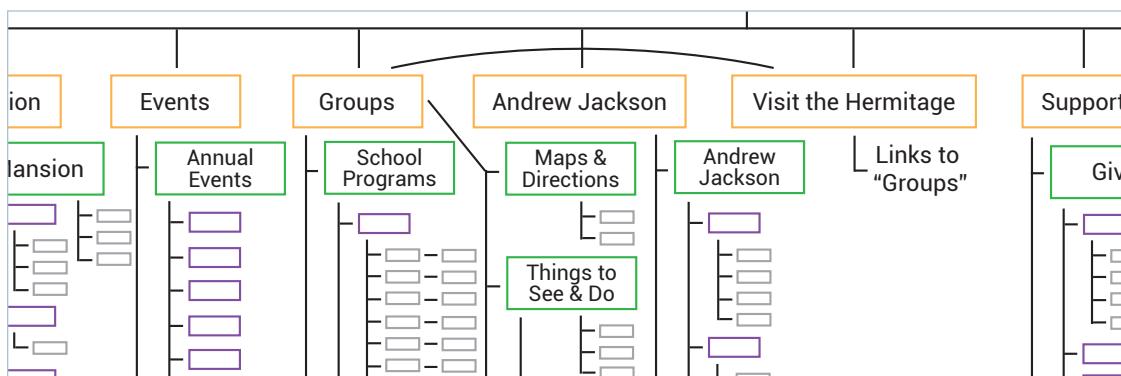
We laid out a defined process and firm timeline to ensure that all of The Hermitage's goals would be met and the project would be completed on time.

## Make a Plan of Attack

We met with all the project stakeholders, including the president, chief curator, marketing team and each department director, to continue to develop our understanding and define the needs of the project. *What did each department need from the website? What did internal users like and dislike about the current website? How did users interact with the website?* The process also included created user profiles, outlining prototypical website users. It was during the discovery phase that we landed on a crucial strategy that would shape the design and organization of the site: **designing for skimmers, swimmers and divers.**

Common in the museum industry, the theory of designing for skimmers, swimmers and divers pushes designers to optimize the experience for users and each level of interest and engagement:

- **Skimmers** just want the highlights. They will read headlines, jumping around to the content that interests them most, and won't invest a significant amount of energy to get information that isn't readily accessible.
- **Swimmers** are willing to put in a little more work to get the information they want. They will read more and spend more time on content, but will only go so deep.
- **Divers** are the most engaged. They want in-depth information and will spend the time and effort necessary to find and absorb it.



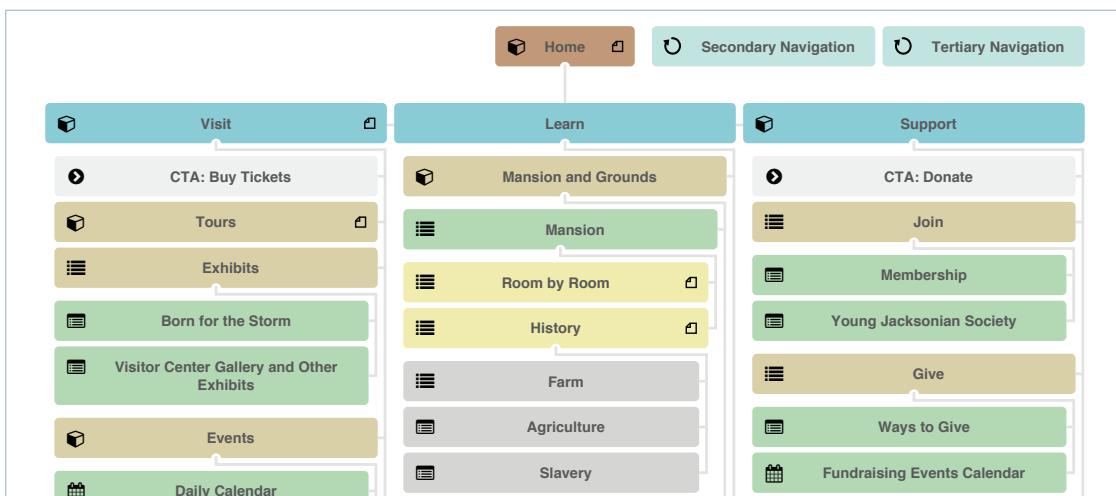
A visual site map of The Hermitage's original website we created to help identify gaps and redundancies.

## Build an Information Architecture

Thoughtful, intuitive information design was critical for a site as complex as thehermitage.com. The existing site was a labyrinth of links that often required users to browse multiple locations to find the information they needed. The navigation had to become more intuitive, especially now that mobile accessibility was a requirement.

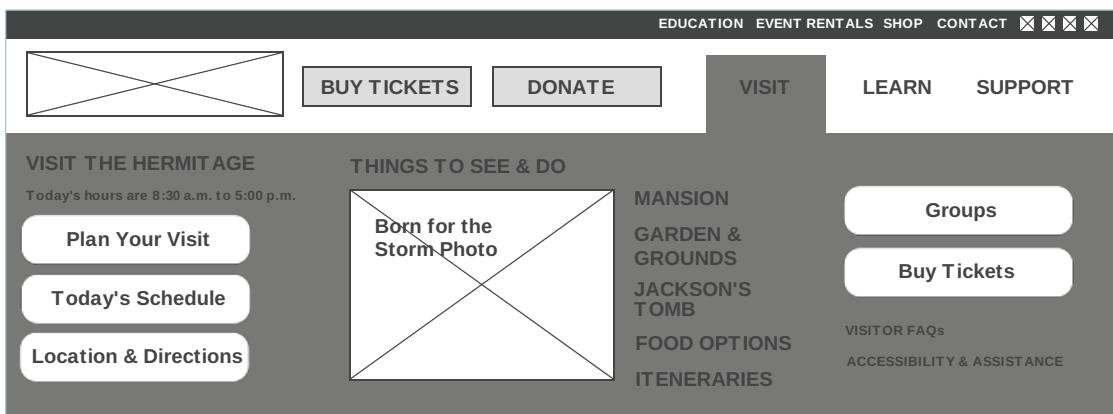


We created a site map to illustrate the current navigation and organization. This highlighted areas of possible confusion and duplicate content. We also evaluated existing analytics, to determine the most and least used areas of the site, and guide content hierarchy decisions.



Next, we put every, and we do mean EVERY, piece of content on its own index card. This allowed us to arrange and rearrange until every element had a logical home. Our goal was to get the navigation to fit in as few primary “buckets” as possible to require a limited number of clicks when searching for information. Additionally, limited primary links simplify navigation for the mobile experience. We settled on Visit, Learn and Support.

We converted this to a digestible site map that we refined with The Hermitage team.



*Wireframes illustrated how content would be laid out on each page.*

Using the site map as our guide, we created wireframes — “skeletons” of individual pages that shows how content will be arranged on the page.

## Design for the Past, Present and Future

Now the fun started as we entered the design phase. We began with a “style tile” — a board that previewed all of the design elements, from typefaces and colors to textures and photo treatments. Adding this step ensures that there are no surprises, and fewer revisions, when the individual page layouts are created. With The Hermitage’s approval, we proceeded to creating page templates.

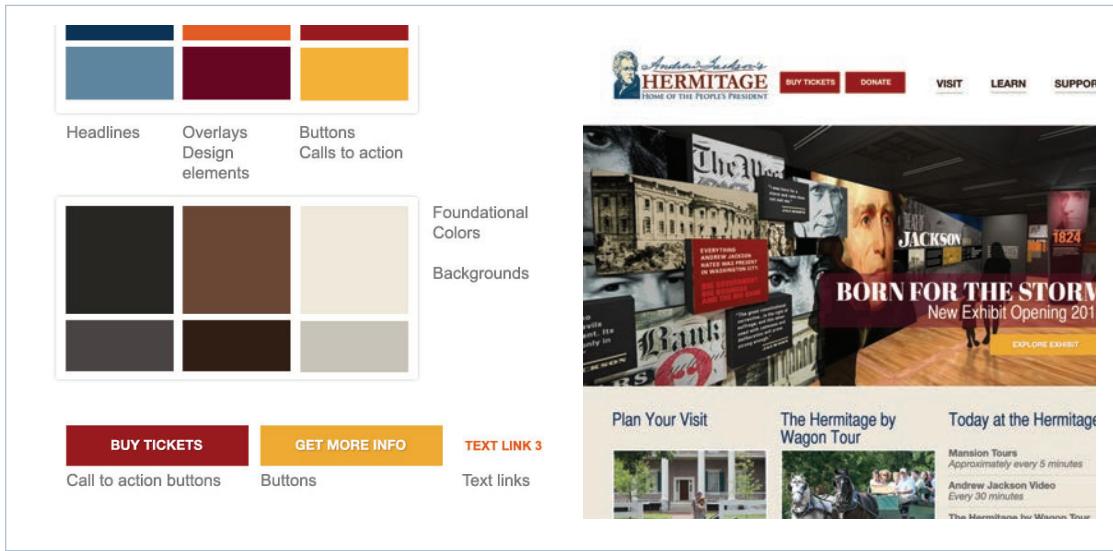
Because it was such a critical component of the new site and would generate the most input from stakeholders, we began by designing the navigation. A “mega-nav” would be used to accommodate the substantial number of links in each section.

We then moved to full page template design. Some of the key design changes included:

- Adding separate sections for Today’s Schedule and Events allows visitors to see what is happening the day they will be visiting, or to plan their visit around a specific event.
- Buy Tickets and Donate, the two most important calls to action, were given prominence in the header on every page.

- The footer was expanded to feature information that was most useful to prospective visitors: the hours, address/map and contact information. The fully expanded navigation is also in the footer for at-a-glance navigating and to alleviate any potential issues with the mega-nav.
- Adding a blog allows admin to regularly populate the site with new content, and engage users in a fresh, unique way. It was designed to be tool for the education and preservation teams to tell stories in a variety of formats to attract skimmers, swimmers and divers.
- The Hermitage has an enormous collection of modern and historic photos at varying levels of quality. Photos were added to the page layouts liberally to better showcase this collection and encourage deeper engagement while still appealing to skimmers. A variety of photo layout templates were made available to accommodate the different sizes and orientations.

The site was beginning to take shape.



## Code, Code and Code Some More

With the information architecture and design finalized, development began.

The site was developed on Wordpress for a number of reasons, including its ease of use for administrators, excellent search engine optimization capabilities, and scalability.

When we begin the development process, we like to start with a solid infrastructure. To do this, we've developed our own theme boilerplate. It uses a combination of existing open-source tools (HTML5 Blank, Foundation) and new features we've written ourselves. Think of it as blank slate that encourages writing elegant code.

Our boilerplate does one other key thing: promotes a mobile-first approach to front-end development. We knew that the existing Hermitage website was discouraging people from viewing it on mobile devices, so we committed to creating a mobile user experience that equaled, or in some cases exceeded, the desktop version.

The only way to achieve this consistent experience was through responsive web design. That means we wrote a single codebase that looks great and loads quickly no matter what size screen is being used.

For the Hermitage, they only have to enter and maintain content in one place. By leveraging custom post types, custom fields, automatic image resizing and shortcodes in Wordpress, we gave the Hermitage complete control of their content without the worry that they would break the design. The front-end code knows what content to take from where and how to make it look great for the user's device.

**MUCH MORE THAN A MANSION**

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Jackson initially called his home "Rural Retreat" before quickly renaming it "Hermitage." Duis sit amet pellentesque mi nu, dictum velit elit amet etiend non.

ANDREW JACKSON

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**DAILY CALENDAR**

**MONDAY**

**SEPTEMBER 29, 2014**

Select a date

**Mansion Tour**

Approximately every 5 minutes

Walking distances, steps, or hills required

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Learn More

**Andrew Jackson Video**

Approximately every 25 minutes

Included with price of admission

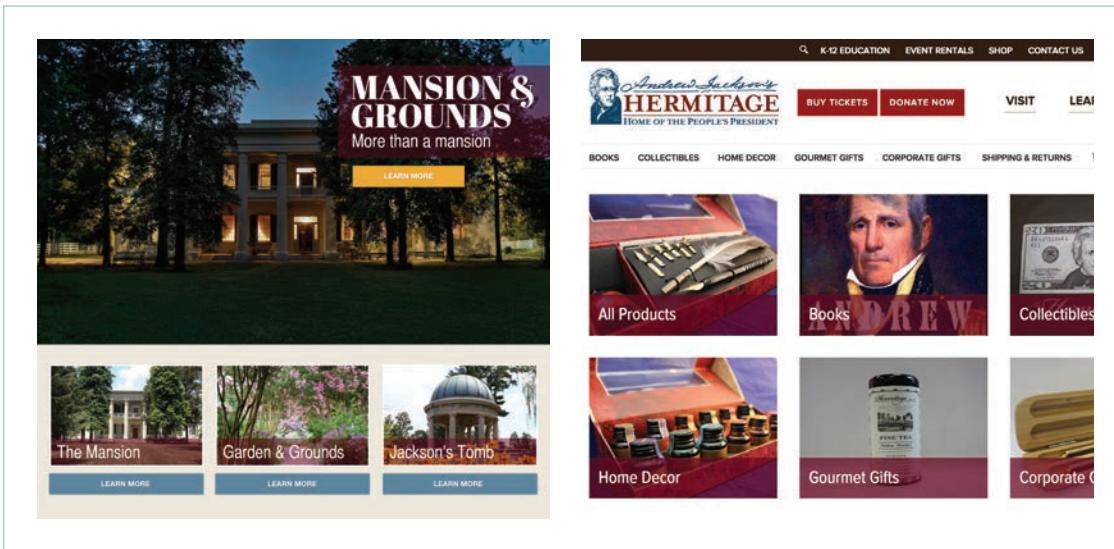
*Wordpress allowed for flexibility in page layouts, a simple backend interface for administrators, and superior search engine optimization capabilities.*

As of June 2015, the Hermitage website is receiving more visits from mobile devices and tablets (55%) than desktop computers (45%), and most of the traffic growth they've experienced since launch is due to the improved experience on all devices.

Because of the nature of their business, The Hermitage had needs that extended beyond what most websites require:

- **Ticket sales** – We assisted The Hermitage in selecting a new online ticket vendor and integrated it with the site. We recommended and implemented several improvements to streamline the ordering process and reduce potential snags for users.

- **Online store** – We developed an online store for the Hermitage within Wordpress and trained their store employees to use it to monitor and fulfill orders. Within the first couple of months after launch, the Hermitage had already experienced an increase in online orders.
- **Event calendar** – We integrated an advanced calendar plugin that allows administrators to manage both a daily and event calendar without the need for entering the same information twice. They are also able to create recurring events and attach ticket sales to events.
- **Advanced admin user roles** – The Hermitage has a number of employees who need access to edit different portions of the site. To accommodate this we created a set of advanced user roles that allow admins access to what they need, but not more than they need. This keeps it simple for admins and limits mistakes.



The screenshot shows two side-by-side views of the website. On the left is the homepage, featuring a large image of the Hermitage building at night, with the text 'MANSION & GROUNDS' and 'More than a mansion'. Below this are three smaller images with 'LEARN MORE' buttons: 'The Mansion', 'Garden & Grounds', and 'Jackson's Tomb'. On the right is the online store, with a header for 'Andrew Jackson's HERMITAGE HOME OF THE PEOPLE'S PRESIDENT' and links for 'BUY TICKETS', 'DONATE NOW', 'VISIT', and 'LEARN'. The store section includes categories like 'All Products', 'Books', 'Collectibles', 'Home Decor', 'Gourmet Gifts', and 'Corporate Gifts', each with a representative image.

*Attention to detail in design and user experience resulted in a site that is both beautiful and functional.*

## Optimize

As development was progressing, we simultaneously began writing new content and optimizing existing content. Working closely with internal stakeholders, we cleaned up content to make it more easily digestible and optimized for search engines. Shorter sentences and paragraphs, pull quotes and arresting headlines were suggested, and targeted keywords were infused into copy.

## Ready, Set, Launch

With development and optimization coming to a close and the majority of the content loaded, we presented the website for The Hermitage to review. We conducted a survey of internal stakeholders to identify any issues, and final edits were made. We identified the day of the week when The Hermitage had the least web traffic, then launched the site.

## Keep It Going

We met again with The Hermitage team to conduct training on how to edit and maintain the site using the content management system. We continue to work closely with The Hermitage to rapidly address any needs that arise as they maintain the site.

# RESULTS

With the unveiling of the new museum exhibit in January 2015 and The Hermitage's public relations efforts, the site received significant media attention at the beginning of the year. It has also performed well in regard to the initial goals that were established:

- The site reached its goal of **50,000 sessions** in one month in March 2015.
- The site originally saw about 90,000 pageviews each month. After the redesign, beginning in March 2015, the site averages over 126,000 pageviews each month, a **40% increase**.
- After a month of the site being live, sales from the online store were **200% above average**.

## In Their Words

Chris Rydburg, Information Specialist and our primary contact at The Hermitage, had this to say about the experience working together:

*"The team at Landslide Creative was an absolute pleasure to work with. Their dedication to our project was above and beyond their call of duty and the Andrew Jackson Foundation's new website was absolutely pristine at the time of launch. They were the only organization to take the time to visit our location prior to our interview with them, demonstrating a deep commitment to their customers as more than just a dollar amount. It was a personal touch that you don't see much anymore and really left the nicest of impressions on our staff."*

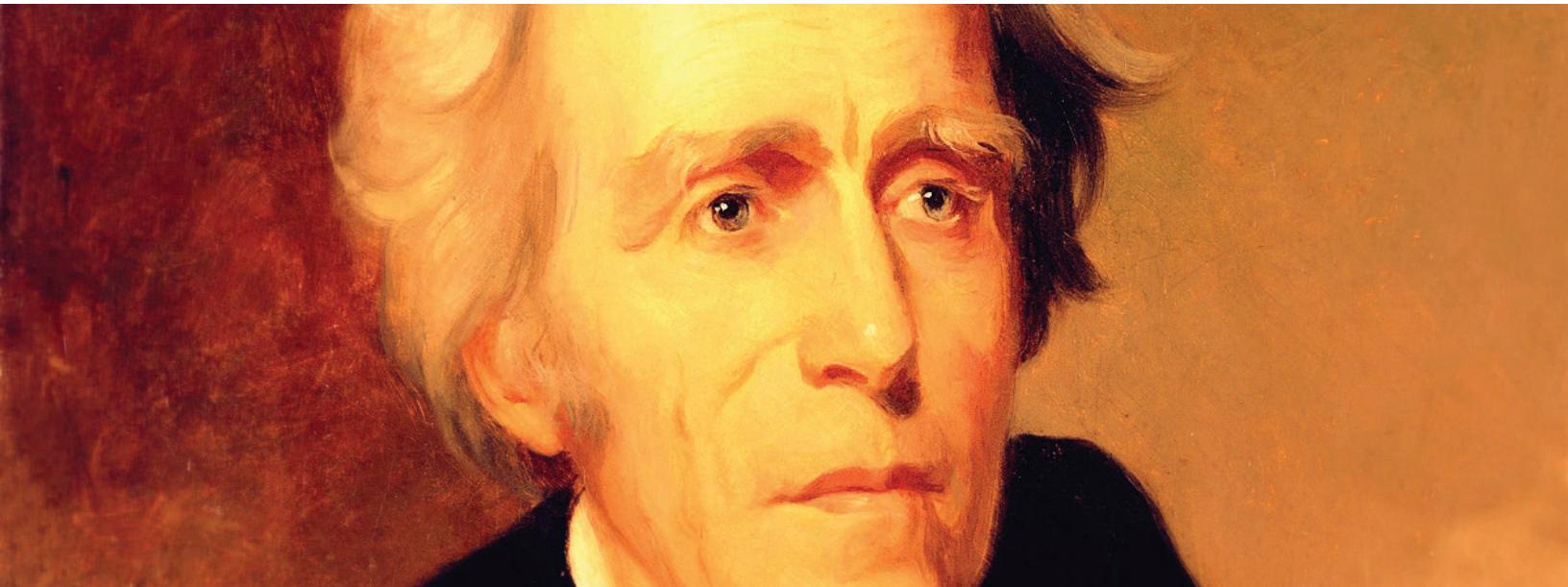
*"The main goal of our project was to redesign the entire website to mirror our new exhibit, both in design, structure and atmosphere. Landslide did a beautiful job communicating with us and ensuring that the project reflected the exhibit. They were able to distill extremely complex concepts and content into bite sized chunks for the user, something that our previous website was incapable of doing at any level."*

*"I would highly recommend them to anyone looking to build or refresh a website. Exceptional people doing exceptional things."*

# SUMMARY

This project with the Hermitage presented many challenges: a large, complex site map, a variety of target audiences, conflicting internal needs and requests, and significant goals.

Despite these challenges, Landslide Creative and The Hermitage leadership and marketing teams were determined to create a final product that would capture and share Andrew Jackson's vibrant personality and substantial contribution to our nation's history.



## See it in Action

Experience the website we created for Andrew Jackson's Hermitage yourself at [thehermitage.com](http://thehermitage.com).

Want to know more about this project or talk about how we can partner on your website redesign or marketing project? Get in touch at [landslidecreative.com](http://landslidecreative.com).