



Christian Øverland, Wisconsin Historical Society Ruth and Hartley Barker Director and CEO

Leading Wisconsin's History into the Future

CHRISTIAN ØVERLAND'S JOURNEY

By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications

With Lake Harriet just a few blocks to the north of his home and the Minnehaha Creek a block to the south, Christian Øverland spent most of his youth immersed in the sights and sounds of his southwest Minneapolis neighborhood.

“Out my front door, I could walk to school, fish, hear music from the bandstand, and live in a very public way,” Øverland recalls. “My childhood included summers in northern Wisconsin and winters filled with skiing and snowshoeing. I was always aware of my community and where I fit into it.”

Rooted in his Norwegian heritage, Øverland's early worldview was shaped by the landscapes and traditions of the upper Midwest. These core principles led him on a journey of discovery that eventually brought him to Madison, where he now fulfills a lifelong passion for history,

preservation and storytelling as the Ruth and Hartley Barker Director and CEO of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

► College on hold, but life full speed ahead

Fresh out of high school, Øverland and his best friend temporarily set aside their plans to attend college. Instead, they embarked on an adventure that foreshadowed Øverland's career: a year living off the land in Minnesota's Boundary Waters, hunting, fishing, and devouring literature from Shakespeare to Arthur Conan Doyle.

“My friend John and I cut a deal with our parents that we would do it for one year and go to college after,” he said. “We made our way up the Gunflint Trail through the Superior National Forest, lived in a small cabin, and had a boat and a dirt bike to get around on. It was transformative.”

This blend of adventure and curiosity eventually carried





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him through studies in architecture, English literature and art history at the University of Minnesota.

“I started to see a pathway when I began volunteering at the Walker Art Center in college. The director took me under his wing to do some amazing things,” said Øverland. “Yet before finishing undergraduate school, I still wasn’t sure about my path, so I went to Boston and worked in a restaurant chain for a year, designing kitchens and opening new restaurants in Boston, Chicago and Ottawa, Ontario.”

Although he soon tired of the chaos of the restaurant industry, this time proved to be worthwhile for Øverland. “I went back to school to finish my degree, and it was clarifying for me,” he said. “I wanted to work in museums and began work at the Minnesota Historical Society. Convinced that I had chosen the right career and wanted to run a museum, I headed to New York to pursue a master’s degree in American history and museum studies.”

With a degree from the Cooperstown Graduate Program under his belt, Øverland returned to the Minnesota Historical Society. But it wasn’t long before he left again. In 1992, Øverland joined The Henry Ford, an American museum complex in Dearborn, Michigan. By 1999, he was director of Greenfield Village, an open-air museum and part of The Henry Ford featuring nearly 100 historic buildings relocated or reconstructed on-site.

“Places like Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park laboratory, a courthouse where Abraham Lincoln practiced law, and Henry Ford’s birthplace and workshop are just a few of the places that can be found there,” he said. “History is about space and place; it is meant to be living and breathing. I was honored to be a part of it.”

Øverland was at The Henry Ford for over 26 years, advancing through the ranks to become executive vice president and chief historian. During his time there, he led numerous significant preservation efforts, championing exhibits on American innovation, including the relocation and restoration of Buckminster Fuller’s futuristic “Dymaxion” house, which pushed the boundaries of design with its suspension-based circular structure.

► **An unexpected opportunity for a “dream job”**

By late 2017, with his children in high school or starting college, and neck deep in a capital campaign at The Henry Ford, a new opportunity suddenly emerged. The Wisconsin



▲ Rendering of the new Wisconsin History Center under construction on the Capitol Square in Madison.

Historical Society was seeking a leader to guide it into its next chapter, including the construction of a new state-of-the-art Wisconsin History Center. Though initially hesitant, Øverland’s wife, herself a public historian, encouraged him to pursue it as their family’s next adventure.

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Arriving in Madison in January 2018, Øverland unpacked his office and was ready to hit the ground running. “This is my dream job,” he said, “We have an unbelievable collection and a chance to tell Wisconsin’s story in a way no one’s ever done before.”

That vision is ambitious. On April 23, 2025, Øverland was present as the first shovels went into the ground for the new Wisconsin History Center on the Capitol Square in Madison. This new building will not only showcase the state’s vast North American and Wisconsin collections, second only to the Library of Congress, but also position Wisconsin’s story within the context of America’s story.

The scope and richness of Wisconsin’s collections are

stunning: 4,500-year-old native canoes, a shawl worn by Abraham Lincoln, one of the largest agricultural collections in the nation, more than 700 Civil War journals, and, in partnership with UW-Madison, one of the largest film collections outside of Hollywood, to name just a few drops in the bucket of the whole collection.

“The Wisconsin Historical Society has always been seen as a ‘maverick’ organization, one that has consistently pushed boundaries,” he said. “We envision this as a national center for American history, a hub for community engagement across all 72 counties, and a design lab for innovative storytelling.”

He continued, “We want to connect people to history so they can build a better future. This isn’t just about Madison. It’s about everyone in the state, and it’s about connecting Wisconsin to the world.”

The Wisconsin Historical Society, created in 1846 during the state’s constitutional process, is simultaneously an independent state agency and a private membership organization. “This collection belongs to the people. Our goal is to connect people to history. Sharing stories is part of our DNA, and that is the power of this organization.”

Øverland is quick to stress that the organization’s success is built upon an exceptional team. “We have amazing staff, almost 200 full-time people from across the United States,” he said. “From underwater archaeologists and curators to researchers, educators, business services team members and volunteers, our people are working tirelessly to keep things moving, growing and thriving.”

► **Connections to the past shape our state’s future**

American historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author David McCullough, a favorite of Øverland, once said, “Real success is finding your lifework in the work you love.”

For Øverland, these words ring true. His life’s work has been tirelessly keeping history alive. It is powerful and deeply personal.

“My great-great-grandfather fought in the Civil War, and my great-great-grandmother heard Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg Address,” he said with awe in his voice. “This is where my family’s history was impacted. These kinds of connections to our past genuinely shape the direction of our future. This connection is really our greatest gift. We need to continue to tell everyone’s story.”

It’s a dream fueled by a lifetime of curiosity, a love for the past, and a belief that understanding history is essential to building a better future. At the helm of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Christian Øverland is ensuring that the Badger State’s maverick spirit continues to inspire for generations to come.



▲ Rendering of the new Wisconsin History Center under construction on the Capitol Square in Madison.

“I never want Wisconsin to be called a flyover state. We’re a place of ideas, ingenuity and original thinking — and the world needs to know it.” ■



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